MAURICE MENDELSON

LIFE AND WORK of WALT WHITMAN

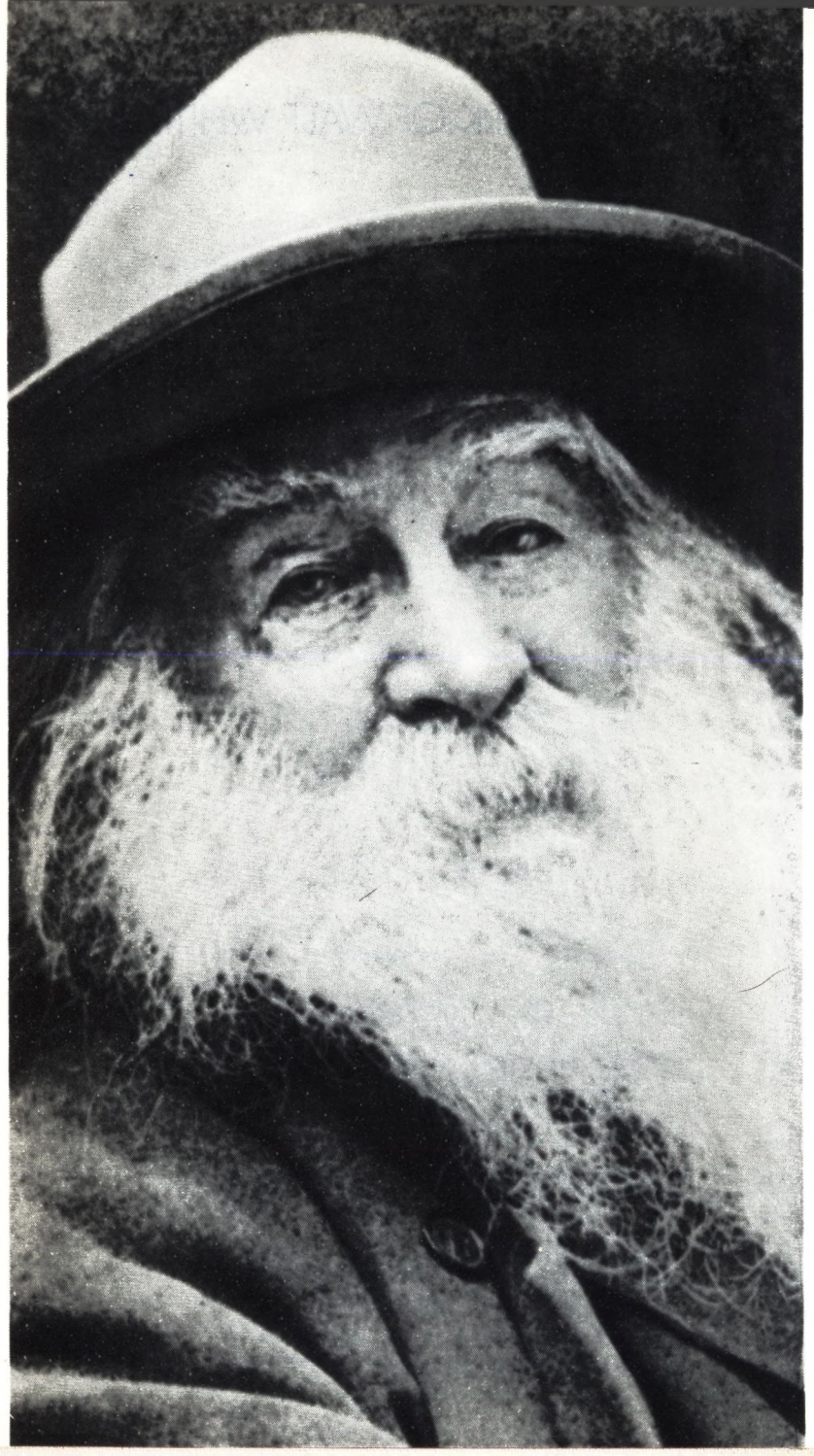
A SOVIET VIEW

This study by the prominent Soviet critic Maurice Mendelson seeks to demonstrate the humanist essence and profoundly democratic nature of Walt Whitman's poetry, as well as its startling boldness and originality of form.

ERRATA

Read:

Page 86, title line:	An Open-Hearted Man
Page 191, line 21:	*(there are millions of suns left.)*...
Page 216, footnote:	[1] W. Whitman, *The Correspondence*, Vol. 1, p. 61.
Page 306, line 2:	recognize, state the case of the mechanics, laborers, artisans,



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A SOVIET VIEW

PROGRESS PUBLISHERS
MOSCOW

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ЖИЗНЬ И ТВОРЧЕСТВО УИТМЕНА

На английском языке

First printing 1976

© Translation into English. Progress Publishers 1976

Printed in the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics

$M\frac{70202\text{-}481}{014(01)\text{-}76}$ 120-75

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FOREWORD

Several years ago, in 1969, poetry lovers all over the world celebrated the 150th birthday of the great American poet, Walt Whitman. Some fourteen years earlier, in 1955, the hundredth anniversary of the appearance of *Leaves of Grass* was also quite widely observed.

Both these dates left an indelible imprint on the minds of thousands — many, many thousands — of men and women in the land where I live, the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics.

These anniversaries certainly testify to the enduring quality of the American poet's work.

Whitman's voice rings out today as clearly as ever. His poetry is so full of freedom and light that one thing is sure: it will maintain its vitality in times to come. This despite the fact that some influential literary critics refer to Whitman's verses with open or scarcely concealed scorn.

We should not be surprised that reactionaries reject Walt Whitman. Was he not convinced that humanity would live on for ever and not die an inglorious and pitiful death; was he not sickened by everything that impoverishes the human spirit and destroys what is best in men and women; did he not believe that real unity of peoples of all races is possible; did he not see the world as boundless in extent and as blindingly beautiful? He spoke of it in words that are simple and eternally fresh, for he wanted poetry, joy and communion with nature to be accessible to every man and woman.

It is precisely those qualities of Whitman's, which are resented by the narrow-minded, that will continue to endear him to the human beings of the future. The indestructible

charm of his poetry is sure to shine ever more brightly as years go by and win its way into the hearts of many millions of people.

We accept this poet, born so many years ago, as our contemporary. He belongs to the not so distant past of world literature, and also to the present day. In many ways *Leaves of Grass* must also be regarded as the future of American prosody. When we read Whitman nowadays, we feel the warmth and inimitable originality of a poetry which will be claimed as their own by our grandchildren, and perhaps by their grandchildren too.

THE "PUZZLE" OF WALT WHITMAN

* * *

That summer the sea-port of Arkhangelsk had an unusual look. Everywhere, on the embankment of the Northern Dvina and in the avenues, in the hotel lobbies and in the shops, there were crowds of foreign-looking people who made themselves understood to the local inhabitants by means of gestures rather than words.

It was 1942. A large convoy of American and English ships which was bringing over a load of armaments for the Soviet Army had been attacked on its way to Arkhangelsk. Only a few boats had managed to get away from the German submarines. The survivors made their way to Soviet territorial waters in lifeboats.

They were faced with the prospect of spending several weeks in a strange town. And now, day after day, they wandered along Arkhangelsk's streets, decked in the fresh delicate greenery of the short northern summer, hurrying nowhere, with nothing to do....

There were various types amongst them: young boys straight from the school bench and "old sea-wolves", respectable engineers and happy, carefree young lads; some were just enjoying the summer sun, organically incapable of dwelling on dark and terrible thoughts; then there were men afflicted with melancholy who found it difficult to forget their recent encounter with death.

They behaved in various ways. Some of them approached life in the land of Soviets, the land of socialism, with curiosity, anxiously picking up news from the fronts. When nazi planes broke through and bombed Arkhangelsk they worked all night helping the victims.

I happened to be in the town at the time, and to this day I remember the sailors' stories about what they had been through and how their comrades had perished.

My memory retains dozens of faces. But I can picture with particular clarity one American sailor whom I met during that difficult summer: graying temples, kindly wrinkles, a certain comfortable carelessness about his baggy clothing, big work-worn hands, bright-blue eyes with an open expression.

I conceived a liking for this American.

Nonetheless, the man remained a stranger to me until one day he suddenly underwent a remarkable change. A soft light began to glow in his eyes, his lips spread in a warm smile and his whole face lit up with tenderness. A thought immediately occurred to me: what a nice person this man must be!

The moment of revelation occurred when the elderly sailor shyly introduced an unexpected question into conversation: was it possible to obtain in Arkhangelsk a copy of a book which he greatly treasured? He had carried it with him over the oceans for dozens of years but in the recent debacle it had gone to the bottom together with the rest of his simple possessions. Did they know this book in Soviet Russia?

The American was asking about a book, but he seemed to be speaking about a living human being, someone very close and dear to him.

The book which the foreign sailor sought — and found — in Arkhangelsk, was a collection of poems. On its title page were the words *Leaves of Grass*. The author of the book was a nineteenth-century American poet — Walt Whitman.

This was not the first time that I had met people for whom Whitman was a kind friend who showed them the beauty of the human soul. But this American sailor, who during the bloodiest of wars related with such sadness his loss to a chance Soviet acquaintance, helped me feel more fully the magnetic attraction of Whitman's poetic word, the beauty of his verse and the strength of his democratic spirit.

The name of Walt Whitman stands on a par with those of the greatest masters of American literature — Mark Twain, James Fenimore Cooper, Herman Melville, Jack London, Theodore Dreiser, Ernest Hemingway, to mention only a few.

But what sort of a person was the author of *Leaves of Grass*? And what is his place in American and world literature?

The outstanding literary critics of the United States, USSR,

England, Cuba, Germany and other countries have said a great deal about the American poet's contribution to the spiritual life of his contemporaries and of their descendants.

The famous American nineteenth-century philosopher and poet, the Sage of Concord, Ralph Waldo Emerson, was one of the first, if not the very first, to understand the significance of *Leaves of Grass*. Immediately after reading the book Emerson wrote Whitman a letter which contained the following lines: "I am not blind to the worth of the wonderful gift of *Leaves of Grass*. I find it the most extraordinary piece of wit and wisdom that America has yet contributed. ... I give you joy of your free and brave thought".[1] This was in 1855.

Thirty years later Cuba's greatest writer, José Marti was to find in Whitman's work something in harmony with the democratic and revolutionary aspirations of people struggling for independence and for a better life. "The grandiose, portentous lines of the old poet," Marti wrote in 1887, "cut through the gloom like fresh gusts of wind." "Listen to the people singing ... listen to Walt Whitman!"[2]

At the end of the last century the poet's love of freedom found a lively echo in the heart of a young Englishwoman, then little known, Ethel Lilian Voynich, who was later to create the novel *The Gadfly*. She wrote to a girl-friend that she often re-read some poems by Whitman and liked them more and more every time.

The dawning of the twentieth century....

In his article "The Destruction of the Personality", written after the 1905 revolution in Russia, Maxim Gorky drew attention to the American poet's leanings, albeit unconscious, towards socialism. He mentioned Whitman first among those writers who, starting out as individualists, "arrive at socialism and the preaching of social action ... calling on man to merge with mankind".[3] In an article which appeared in the first post-revolutionary Russian edition of Whitman's verse, Anatoly Lunacharsky shrewdly remarked that the real foundation of Whitman's poetry was not individualism, but just the opposite, a drive towards collectivism. "The power and overwhelming

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[1] *The Shock of Recognition*, Ed. by E. Wilson, Garden City, N. Y., Doubleday, Doran, 1943, p. 247.

[2] J. Marti, *Obras completas*, t. XIII, Habana, 1961, p. 177.

[3] M. Gorky, *Works* in 30 volumes, Vol. 24, Moscow, 1953, pp. 48-49 (in Russian).

beauty of Whitmanism lies in ... communism, collectivism...," he said. "Whitman is a man with a wide-open heart." [1]

During the years of revolutionary upheaval in Germany, Johannes Becher wrote of the ardent American poet with tenderness and love. The beauty and power of Whitman's poetry have been remarked upon at different times by the Turkish poet Nazim Hikmet, the Chilean Pablo Neruda, the Dane Martin Andersen Nexö and the German Thomas Mann. The Irish communist playwright Sean O'Casey honored the memory of the great American poet in his public speeches. In a letter to the Soviet literary critic A. Elistratova, O'Casey spoke of the fire blazing in Whitman.

When progressive writers of various countries look for an example of genuine inspiration, bold poetic innovation and love of humanity the name of Walt Whitman immediately comes to mind.

The most far-sighted public figures, thinkers and authors of the United States have seen in Whitman a poet of genius, the glory of American national poetry. Among them was one of the most important American poets of the twentieth century, Carl Sandburg, the prominent socialist Eugene Debs and the Secretary of the Communist Party of the United States, Gus Hall. The heroic American communist "Mother Bloor" treasured the memory of "The good, gray poet" (as a girl she had known him). For Theodore Dreiser, Langston Hughes and dozens of other American novelists, poets and playwrights, Whitman's poetry has been something vital and dear.

For hundreds of thousands, perhaps even millions of Americans, Whitman's poetry represents what it did for the sailor who found himself in Arkhangelsk during the Second World War: a source of joy, hope and great aesthetic pleasure.

The poet's works, however, are unknown to many of his countrymen. One American literary critic has written that "the schoolgirl wearing the 'I Hear America Singing' sweater has no exact knowledge of the source of the title repeated in the design of her garment." [2]

There is good reason to speak of the "problem" of Whitman. American critics not infrequently refer to his life and his

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[1] A. Lunacharsky, *Works* in 8 volumes, Vol. 5, Moscow, 1965, p. 387 (in Russian).

[2] Ch. B. Willard, *Whitman's American Fame*, Providence, Brown Univ., 1950, p. 228.

work as a "puzzle". In 1955, for example, Gay Allen, the well-known authority on Whitman's works, wrote: "No author in American literature has been a greater puzzle to his biographers and critics than Walt Whitman." [1]

In the early sixties of this century the literary historian Edwin Miller remarked in the first complete edition of Whitman's writings: "Those who succumb to one current critical fashion virtually read Whitman ... out of the history of poetry." [2] "The poet, the seer, and the man...," Miller continues, "remain mystifying ... despite the thousands of pages expended by biographers in quest of illumination." [3]

In the United States and other countries more than a hundred book-length studies have been devoted to Walt Whitman. The number of articles which examine his life and work must run in the thousands. But in quite a few of these learned investigations the poet is depicted as an ignoramus who passed off clumsy combinations of words as poetry; as a poseur incapable of sincere feeling; as a militant individualist and a shameless braggart; as an enemy of democracy; as an apologist of expansionism; as an advocate of slavery; as a man for whom the people were only a faceless crowd; as an eccentric whose extravagances aimed at self-advertisement; as a priest of the cult of "pure art", and so on and so forth.

Let there be no misunderstanding: I do not have in mind the opinions of the run-of-mill American journalists of the mid-nineteenth century who greeted the first editions of *Leaves of Grass* with hoots of derision simply because the poetry in the book was unlike the classical odes or romantic poems to which they were accustomed. I am speaking about American critics of the present day.

Here are two examples taken from American critical literature of recent years.

L. M. Clark dedicated her book *W. Whitman's Concept of the American Common Man* to proving that Whitman was really hostile towards democracy and the common man. Leslie Fiedler, in company with others, has worked hard to convince his readers that in his life and his work the author of *Leaves of Grass* was nothing but a cunning impostor.

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[1] G. W. Allen, *The Solitary Singer*, N. Y., Macmillan, 1955, p. IX.

[2] Walt Whitman, *The Correspondence*, Vol. I, Ed. by E. H. Miller, N. Y., New York Univ. Press, 1961, p. 1.

[3] Ibid., p. 2.

Emory Holloway, whose outstanding role in the development of American studies of Whitman is well enough known, in his book *Free and Lonesome Heart* expressed anxiety about the further development of Whitman research in the United States. He hoped that "the myth of the future (about Walt Whitman.— *M. M.*) will be one that points up his real service to mankind rather than one which obscures this service by half-truths calculated to his discredit".[1] Although Holloway's book unfortunately develops a highly questionable thesis (about a supposed son of the poet), the author inequivocally condemns "pseudoscientific" works of Freudian nature concerned with Whitman's "alleged homosexuality".[2]

Who, then, is right in the heated debate which has been going on now for more than a hundred years? What was Walt Whitman really like? What was foremost in his heart: cold self-love and indifference to good and evil, or a warm sympathy for common people and for the liberation movements in his native land and other countries? Was Walt Whitman a skilful demagogue playing at democracy, or a poet whose world view was organically linked with that of the democratic masses? Is Whitman's poetry a collection of vulgar sound effects or is it comparable, as Arnold Zweig has written, with the music of Beethoven? Was the poet bound hand and foot by bourgeois individualism, or did his strength lie in an emotional and intellectual leaning towards collectivism?

The struggle for Whitman is being carried on in our time and it has lost neither its intensity nor its social significance.

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[1] E. Holloway, *Free and Lonesome Heart*, N. Y., Vantage Press, 1960, p. 13-14.

[2] Ibid., p. 16.

PART ONE

THE BIRTH OF A POET

* * *

A Long Foreground

Whitman's book of poetry *Leaves of Grass* contains the following lines:

> *My tongue, every atom of my blood, form'd from this*
> *soil, this air,*
> *Born here of parents born here from parents the same,*
> *and their parents the same,*
> *I, now thirty-seven years old in perfect health begin,*
> *Hoping to cease not till death.*[1]

These verses first appeared in print in the poem "Starting from Paumanok" (1860) and were incorporated, in 1881, into the famous poem "Song of Myself". In actual fact, when Whitman's collection of poetry went on sale, he was only thirty-six years old.

But of course this was a respectable age at which to start as a poet. When he greeted Whitman "at the beginning of a great career", Emerson was quite right in adding that it must have had a long foreground somewhere for such a start. Whitman's journey to *Leaves of Grass* really had a long foreground.

At the dawn of the nineteenth century, when young Walt was beginning to discover the world, there was a great deal in

[1] Quotations from *Leaves of Grass* (final texts of the poems) are based on the book: W. Whitman, *Leaves of Grass*, Ed. by E. Holloway, Garden City, N. Y., Doubleday, Doran, 1928. Quotations from "Specimen Days", "Democratic Vistas" and some other of Whitman's prose writings are based on the book: W. Whitman, *The Complete Poetry and Prose*, Vol. Two, N. Y., Pellegrini & Cudahy, 1948. These quotations are given without footnotes.

the United States which seemed young and full of promise. Many participants of the American bourgeois revolution of the eighteenth century were still alive, the last of that heroic breed who had forced the English monarchy to unclench the fist that had gripped the American colonies.

The transformation of thirteen English colonies into an independent state, and moreover, into a republic, was an event of great import. Somewhat later, at the end of the century, the democratic forces of the United States won a further victory. Thomas Jefferson, the author of the revolutionary *Declaration of Independence*, was elected president.

When Walt Whitman was born, Jefferson's presidency was already a thing of the past, but Americans still remembered it well and placed great hopes in the ideals promulgated by Jefferson. It must be remembered, however, that the American republic was a bourgeois state in which the cult of the dollar grew stronger day by day. Besides, the United States of America was from its very inception a country of legalized Negro slavery.

More than once in the early nineteenth century one of the founding figures of American poetry, Philip Freneau, expressed his alarm about the domination of greedy men of property. Soon the working people of the United States had to shoulder the burden of one of the earliest economic crises in the history of world capitalism. Nonetheless millions of Americans looked to the future with hope. Were they not, after all, citizens of a country which had no king and no nobility? And America had so much unoccupied land that it was possible (or so it seemed) to provide a farm for any man.

The first Whitmans had come to the New World in the mid-seventeenth century. They owned a large piece of land on Long Island (which the poet loved to call by its Indian name, "Paumanok"). But Walter Whitman senior, the father of the future poet, inherited a farm of very modest dimensions. Walt's mother also grew up on Long Island, in a more prosperous family. Her father was an American of Dutch descent who bred horses.

Walter Whitman junior was born on May 31st, 1819, in the village of West Hills, only thirty miles from New York (Manhattan). Some years later the head of the family came to the conclusion that he could not support his family in West Hills, and so he moved with his wife and three young children

to Brooklyn, which was next to New York, on the other side of the East River.

At first the poet's father worked as a hired carpenter. Later he founded something in the nature of a small building enterprise.

He struggled hard to become a businessman, but his dream of "making good" was never to be fulfilled. He died without making a proper provision for his family. Biographers usually describe him simply as a failure whose efforts came to nothing because he had no gift for "making money". But this "unlucky" man's tragedy had something typical about it. The fact is that the head of the Whitman family labored under a burden most uncongenial for a man of business—he was honest, trusted people and had profound faith in the ideals of democracy.

It is interesting, that at about the same time failure also came to haunt John Marshall Clemens, the father of another American writer, Mark Twain. Walt Whitman and Mark Twain spoke in almost identical words of their irreproachably honest fathers being the victims of sharp dealers.

There can be no doubt whatsoever that Walt was indebted to his father for a great deal, in particular for that deep understanding of certain social problems which he later displayed in *Leaves of Grass.*

The biography of Whitman written by his friend, Richard Maurice Bucke (it is possible that some of the pages devoted to the Whitman family are the work of the poet himself) contains the noteworthy confession that it was from his father that the author of *Leaves of Grass* inherited his love of freedom.

Walter Whitman senior was faithful to the revolutionary ideals of the eighteenth century Enlighteners, who had paved the way for the American bourgeois republic. To the very end of his life the poet's father held dear all that was democratic and revolutionary in the ideas of Jefferson.

Whitman senior's devotion to the finest traditions of the War of Independence is confirmed by his attitude to Thomas Paine, the boldest, most consistent and plebean of the rebels who roused the Americans to struggle against the English oppressors.

The poet's father had met Paine not long before the latter died in the first decade of the nineteenth century—at the time Thomas Paine was no longer held in respect in the United

States. He was abused from all sides, was poor and often ignored. Only a few people had the courage to maintain contact with such a dangerous free-thinker. One of them was Walter Whitman. At that time he was earning his living as a carpenter in New York, and visited Paine several times in his modest dwelling on Bleeker Street. The young carpenter read not only the works of Paine, but also the writings of several other eighteenth-century Enlighteners including the French ones.

However, Whitman senior was not only concerned with the ideas of the past. The future poet was only ten years old when Robert Dale Owen (the son of the well-known utopian socialist) and Frances Wright, the famous leader of the American liberation movement, began to publish the weekly newspaper, the *Free Enquirer.*

Some idea of the views held by the editors of this publication may be gained from an article by Wright which appeared in the *Free Enquirer* in November 1830:

"What distinguished the present from every other struggle in which the human race has been engaged is that the present is, evidently openly and acknowledgedly, a war of class, and that this war is universal...; it is now everywhere the oppressed millions who are making common cause against oppression...." The author of the article does not condemn the struggle of the exploited classes. Millions of people, Wright continues, are "rather chargeable with excess of patience and over abundance than with too eager a spirit for the redress of injury, not to speak of recourse to vengeance." [1]

Walter Whitman senior was one of the subscribers to the *Free Enquirer.* He was not frightened by the fact that among "respectable people" Wright had the reputation of an immoral and dangerous person.

There was always plenty of "radical" literature in Whitman's home and "rebellious" ideas were hotly discussed in the family. Whitman senior passed on to his son his own respect and love for Jefferson, Paine and Wright.

Whitman's father died soon after his son's first book of verse was published. Not one letter from the poet to his father has been preserved. But Walt Whitman did leave behind a large

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[1] Ph. S. Foner, *History of the Labor Movement in the United States,* International Publishers, N. Y., 1947, p. 132.

number of letters addressed to his mother, Louisa van Velsor Whitman. In his youth, and even more so in later years, whenever he left Brooklyn for long or short periods of time, Walt Whitman corresponded regularly with his mother. He loved this simple, scarcely literate woman with a gentle and loyal love. She did not understand his poetry but had a responsive heart and a rare ability to appreciate people and grow attached to them, to "fall in love" with them.

In one of his poems Whitman spoke of the impression made on his mother by the beauty of an Indian girl who had come hoping to get some sort of work. The poet wrote:

The more she look'd upon her she loved her,
Never before had she seen such wonderful beauty and
purity,
She made her sit on a bench by the jamb of the fire-
place, she cook'd food for her,
She had no work to give her, but she gave her
remembrance and fondness.
The red squaw staid all the forenoon, and toward
the middle of the afternoon she went away,
O my mother was loth to have her go away,
All the week she thought of her, she watch'd for her
many a month,
She remember'd her many a winter and many a summer....

From his mother the poet inherited his gentleness of spirit and his ability to become deeply attached to people.

"Growth-Health-Work"

The childhood of Walter Whitman junior in Brooklyn differed in no way from that of any ordinary American boy from a simple family. As an old man Whitman more than once recalled the hardships his family suffered when he was a child. He also remembered that once he went with his mother and father to hear the Quaker rebel Elias Hicks (who dared to express his liking for Paine).

Walt attended school for a few years, but at the age of eleven he had to start work; his first job was as an errand-boy in a lawyer's office. Fortunately, his employer was a good man. He helped the boy to learn to write properly and gave him the

chance to borrow books from a library. Soon young Walt went to work on a newspaper, where he could learn the printer's trade. This was his "college education", so typical of many American writers: some twenty years later Mark Twain was to follow almost the same path, working in the print-shop of a newspaper.

Whitman's dearest recollections of childhood and adolescence were those trips he made to the rural spots of Long Island. His relatives, including his maternal grandfather, still lived on a farm there, and Walt never missed an opportunity to visit them. Just as Mark Twain at the end of his life wrote about his uncle's farm as a "heavenly place" for boys, so Whitman recalled with warm feeling the charm of the Hempstead plains.

In the poem, "There Was a Child Went Forth", Whitman captures a young boy's poetic perception of nature. The child not only sees the grass, the young lambs, the village schoolmistress on her way to school, not only hears the song of the phoebe-bird, but all of these become a part of him.

The early lilacs became part of this child,
And grass and white and red morning-glories, and
white and red clover,
and the song of the phoebe-bird,
And the Third-month lambs and the sow's pink-faint litter, and
the mare's foal and the cow's calf...
The field-sprouts of Fourth-month and Fifth-month
became part of him,
Winter-grain sprouts and those of the light-yellow
corn, and the esculent roots
of the garden,
And the apple-trees cover'd with blossoms and the
fruit afterward, and wood-berries, and
the commonest weeds by the road,
And the old drunkard staggering home from the outhouse
of the tavern whence he had lately risen....

Long Island, where he was born, had not only plains and fields, farms and villages: the ocean was nearby. The small village where Whitman lived stood on one of the highest points of the island and the sea was visible both to the north and to the south.

Although his soul was filled with joy at this closeness to nature, Whitman never had any penchant for the hermit's life. It was not only the endless plains, the vast ocean expanses and the burning sky at sunset that gave him pleasure; he enjoyed being with people too.

"Growth-Health-Work" is the title given to a section of twenty lines in "Specimen Days" which is devoted to the story of Whitman's early youth. Towards the mid-thirties of the last century, Walt became "a healthy, strong youth". At about this time his family left Brooklyn and returned for a short while to the rural life of Long Island.

His carefree childhood, however, was now already behind him, and the youth was forced to earn his own keep. Although young Walt had learnt the art of type-setting well, he did not stay for long in any one print-shop. The story of his early working life is one of endless moves from one job to another. There is a legend that Whitman was simply lazy.

When I discuss Whitman's life as a professional newspaperman, I shall try to explain the real meaning of what certain contemporaries of the poet preferred to call "laziness". But why is it that we have before us such a long list of newspaper print-shops in which Whitman worked for only a couple of months, or even less? There is no special secret here; young Walt was simply restless. Add to this that the newspaper business in the United States was at the time the least "respectable" of professions. Newspapers quickly went bankrupt.

At the age of seventeen, having lost his job in yet another print-shop and despairing of finding another (one of the regular economic crises, which were becoming a more and more common feature of American life, had broken out), Walt went to Hempstead village, where his parents lived at the time. It was hard to make a living, and the youth jumped at the opportunity of becoming a village teacher. What did it matter that he himself was not very well educated? Walt Whitman had at least thoroughly mastered grammar (the fruits of his work at the lawyer's and his newspaper jobs), and he was kind to children.

His pupils were apparently very fond of him. In any case he did not follow the example of other teachers who assiduously applied the birch; he behaved simply and did not consider it beneath his dignity to freely play with the children.

At about this time Whitman began to be concerned with political problems, and also with philosophical and moral ones. He was not yet twenty years old, but he already took an active part in the discussions which were organized by the village debating clubs. In his days as a teacher in one of the villages on Long Island, eighteen-year-old Whitman spoke as an equal with local doctors and judges, and even with one member of the state legislature.

The young Whitman's views of the world, like his father's, were based on the bourgeois-democratic system associated with the name of Thomas Jefferson. His ideal was the free farmer, his hope, an America where there would be no poverty and no great wealth, where the broad expanses of land would allow everyone to make a living while retaining his independence.

Jefferson himself, who had led the struggle of the country's democratic elements against the Federalists (the spokesmen of the "moneyed" townspeople and the rich plantation-owners) was no longer alive; nevertheless, together with other "simple American folk", the Whitmans, both father and son, persistently looked for the Jeffersonian mark in the activities of prominent politicians of the thirties. They were attracted to those who condemned the blatant greed of the bankers and manufacturers of the northern states, but they overlooked the fact that many of these political leaders were quite sympathetic to slavery in the South. The most noteworthy of the politicians regarded as Jefferson's heirs was Andrew Jackson. This leader of the Democratic Party became President of the United States when Walt was still a boy. Van Buren largely followed in Jackson's footsteps when he replaced him eight years later.

In 1836, when the time came for the next election campaign, Walt Whitman was already sufficiently mature to understand what was taking place in his native land. The Democrat Van Buren was opposed by a candidate of the Whigs, a party which quite openly defended the interests of the capitalist elements of the country. Young Whitman was against the Whigs and accepted with approval all that Frances Wright was doing to secure the election of Van Buren.

Whitman associated Wright's name not only with the Democrats' struggle against the Whigs, but also with the many freedom-loving ideas expressed in her writings. This "noble" woman (as Whitman called her) always stressed the natural equality of men as well as the right of workers to unite in

defense of their interests. She also spoke and wrote of the need to improve the educational system.

Whitman was prepared to defend this "troublemaker" against all her enemies, for she was incomparably "nobler, grander ... than all who traduced her".[1] Whitman said about Wright that she "has always been to me one of the sweetest of sweet memories: we all loved her: fell down before her: her very appearance seemed to enthral us".[2] "I never felt so glowingly towards any other woman,"[3] he said about Frances Wright on another occassion.

It was she who aroused Whitman's interest in the writings of progressive French thinkers. Volney's works produced a great impression on him. The poet was much indebted to Wright's influence for the utopian and anti-clerical aspects of his outlook. He was also much impressed by her speeches against Negro slavery.

Alongside the image of Frances Wright the poet always retained in his mind that of Thomas Paine. Walt Whitman often talked about Paine, about his merits and the slurs which he had to bear in the United States, with a certain colonel Fellows, who had known the great thinker personally and was himself, according to Whitman, a man with a very exalted sense of honor.

"We All Shall Rest At Last"

The earliest literary efforts of Whitman the type-setter have not been preserved — nobody valued collections of the wretched papers for which the future poet worked. And in any case, his notes were usually unsigned. In his old age, however, the poet stated that he began to write sentimental bits for the *Long Island Patriot* when he was eleven or twelve years old. "... This was about 1832," he said. Soon after this he "had a piece or two in George P. Morris's then celebrated and fashionable *Mirror*, of New York City.... How it made my heart double-beat to see *my piece* on the pretty white paper, in nice type."

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[1] H. Traubel, *With Walt Whitman in Camden*, N. Y., Mitchell Kennerley, 1915, p. 499.

[2] Ibid., p. 205.

[3] Ibid., p. 500.

It is known for certain that as a youth Whitman worked for the *Long Island Democrat.* The editor of this paper had even reprinted several of his compositions from another local paper before their author started to work for him as a type-setter. It was possibly Whitman's value as a supplier of literary material that made the editor hold on to him, since, if one is to believe the editor's wife, the youth fulfilled his duties in the print-shop none too assiduously.

By his twentieth birthday, Walt Whitman already had reason to consider himself a professional journalist, albeit of a distinctly provincial cast. In 1838 some friends helped him to found his own weekly paper, the *Long Islander.* Quite naturally, in an out-of-the-way place, the editor of the paper also set the type, did the press-work and delivered the paper to subscribers himself. These were happy days and months in Whitman's life. To the end of his days he cherished the memory of his meetings with "the dear old-fashion'd farmers and their wives, the stops by the hay-fields, the hospitality, nice dinners, occasional evenings, the girls, the rides through the brush...".

Yes, most of Whitman's writings of these years are lost. However, a series of articles under the general title "Sun-Down Papers From the Desk of a Schoolmaster" have been uncovered and there can be no doubt that they were written by him. These articles appeared at the very beginning of the forties and are frankly didactic in character. The young moralist wages battle against the bad habit of smoking, and even against coffee. He admits that he knows nothing about women, and therefore has skirted around the topic. On the other hand, no few lines are devoted to the sin of miserliness. In the struggle against this evil the author uses humor as a weapon. He cunningly sings the praises of the idler who does not wish to live the way sharp dealers (cotton merchants, for example) do; he mockingly forewarns property-owners that there is no way to take accumulated wealth with them into the next world, for the train which travels there has no provisions for carrying baggage.

The young editor, type-setter and teacher considered himself a poet as well. In his first verses he dealt for the most part with a subject that had always concerned him — the immoral nature of the pursuit of wealth.

Whitman's first poetic works were written in the romantic vein, which at that time almost completely dominated Ameri-

can literature. These were imitative, unskilled verses, and yet the views of life which Whitman absorbed from the romantic poets of his country — from Edgar Allan Poe, William Cullen Bryant and others — were based on exalted humanist principles.

The world-outlook of the best representatives of American romanticism corresponded to the organic needs of Whitman's soul, to his conceptions, hazy as they were, of the nature of reality, conceptions differing widely from those held by the typical American bourgeois.

The romantics, who were the immediate forerunners and contemporaries of Whitman (not only poets, but prose-writers as well, among them James Fenimore Cooper, Washington Irving, Nathaniel Hawthorne, Henry David Thoreau and Herman Melville), became aware of some of the internal contradictions that characterized the social order which had emerged as a result of the War of Independence. Incapable of grasping the full significance of these contradictions, they mirrored the basic conflicts within American society mostly in mystified form, in complicated and often hazy romantic images. Nevertheless, at the foundation of the more important writings of American romantics lay an awareness of the disharmony between the democratic slogans of the American republic and the grim reality of the bourgeois ways of life.

Poe, Hawthorne and Melville gave voice to this conflict in a particularly gloomy manner. They rejected the world of the dollar, the merciless struggle for gain, for success at any cost, the pitiless individualism. It was no accident that several of the romantics were impressed by the patriarchal customs still preserved among the Indians and the natives of the islands of the Pacific.

While writing his early verses, Whitman most often tried to imitate Bryant, who contrasted the beauty, might and wealth of nature of the new continent to inhuman social relations, and revealed moral untenability of the philosophy of the man of property.

In the poem "Thanatopsis", written before the author of *Leaves of Grass* was born, Bryant glorifies the all-levelling grave which reduces to naught the achievements of the mighty of this world. The "magnificent" couch of death awaits us all, it is impossible to escape it, and in the "mighty sepulchre" money

and power no longer have any meaning — here the pauper will find his place beside the kings, "the powerful of the earth". It is quite obvious that the author of this poem took his cue from the eighteenth-century English poets, well-known for their "graveyard" poetry. Bryant's poetry was a reflection of the feelings of Americans who regretted the passing of the "old order" and the domination in the United States of the accumulators of wealth.

Whitman composed the majority of his early romantic poems around the age of twenty. We can judge his first attempts only on the basis of some fifteen short pieces which he published in the late thirties and early forties in the provincial papers which he either edited or worked on at that time.

"Our Future Lot" (1838), the first of Whitman's poems known to us, appeared in the above-mentioned weekly *Long Island Democrat.* The young author strove to convince the "swelling soul" that once he broke out of "this earthy cage" he would rise to "bright and starlike majesty".[1]

Whitman not only made use of the traditional motifs of American romantic poetry of the time, but followed the usual forms of verse structure (his poems, written in classical meter, are rhymed).

The real meaning of this and several other songs glorifying death written by young Whitman is plainly revealed in the poem "Fame's Vanity" (1839). To what end is man's breast full of "thoughts with vanity all rife"? To rush in hot pursuit of fame's "false glare" means to deprive oneself of real happiness. It is better to remain "obscure, unknown", better to lie beneath a "markless resting stone". Death in any case makes all men equals, the "mighty one and lowly wretch".[2]

The very titles of these poems speak of despondency ("My Departure", 1839; "The End of All", 1840; "We All Shall Rest At Last", 1840). The poet calls upon the man who has not rid himself of vain strivings to recognize their futility.

Nature is sublime in her quietude, only "weak, proud, and erring man" does not know the meaning of rest, busied as he is with senseless struggle ("The Love That Is Hereafter", 1840).

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[1] *The Uncollected Poetry and Prose of Walt Whitman*, Vol. I, Ed. by E. Holloway, N. Y., Peter Smith, 1932, p. 2.

[2] Ibid., p. 5

In the poem "We All Shall Rest At Last" we find the following lines:

No: dread ye not the fearful hour;
The coffin, and the pall's dark gloom;
For there's a calm to throbbing hearts,
And rest, down in the tomb.[1]

Thoughts on the pointlessness and even baseness of the desire for power over things and over other people were natural for a follower of Paine and Wright. But the ideal so dear to these thinkers, of a man oppressing no one and exploiting no one, nor allowing himself to be oppressed or exploited, did not find its expression in the poems "We All Shall Rest At Last" and "The End Of All". And this was symptomatic. To many Americans it seemed that the time of revolutionary struggles which had marked the birth of the republic was now irrevocably a part of the past.

Let us note, however, that in Whitman's early verses there are not only "graveyard" images. For instance, the poet wrote patriotic pieces in honor of the fathers who had fought for the independence of the United States ("The Columbian's Song", 1840, for example).

The subject of another poem, "The Inca's Daughter" (1840), was probably borrowed from Cooper's books about the Indians. Some intonations in it are typical of Byron's oriental poems. Whitman depicts an Indian girl who prefers death to capture. The Inca's daughter proclaims,

"Now, paleface, see! The Indian girl
Can teach thee how to bravely die...."[2]

"The Inca's Daughter" and "The Columbian's Song" were also written according to the accepted canons of American poetry of the period. Much later, in the poem "Song of the Exposition", Whitman was to mock the sentimental imagery and feeble rhymes which filled mid-nineteenth-century American poetry. But in the early verses of the man who wrote "Song of the Exposition" there were many qualities which in the future he himself would deride.

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[1] Ibid., p. 11.
[2] Ibid., p. 8.

Between the ages of twenty and thirty Whitman wrote less and less poetry. There is no doubt that any youthful faith he had had in his calling as a poet quickly disappeared. He made a series of agonizing attempts to become a short story writer, and during the first half of the forties wrote many short stories. They were printed in newspapers and magazines which folded after a brief existence. It was rare for collections of them to be preserved.

We know enough short stories by Whitman, however, to be quite certain that his talents were not suited to this genre. He did his best to intrigue the reader, but on the whole his prose is exceedingly weak. The poetics of mystery and terror typical of the American romantic school of the thirties and forties shines with a dreary glow in Whitman's stories. At the same time, one is aware of an irksome tendency to moralize.

Whitman placed his greatest hopes on the novel *Franklin Evans; or the Inebriate. A Tale of the Times.* He wrote it in 1842, when he was only 23. In his old age Whitman used to tell his friends that he wrote this cautionary tale about the harmfulness of alcohol while himself inebriated. There is reason, however, to doubt that the author really was hypocritical in writing *The Inebriate*: there is too much genuine feeling in this clumsy and melodramatic work.

The poet recalled that he had undertaken the writing of the novel when he was offered a certain sum in cash for an exciting work exposing the evils of drunkenness. *Franklin Evans,* however, does not deal only with the sad fate of the alcoholic. A considerable portion of the story is concerned with the joyless life of young men who come to the city from the provinces in search of work. By this time New York was already a big capitalist city, where naive young boys, left to their own devices, lived in cheap and dirty furnished rooms, exposed to every possible form of vice and hardship. Whitman described all this as best he could. Likewise he contrasted the fate of a poor man imprisoned for an insignificant offense with the successful life of rich men who obtained their money by dishonest means but remained unpunished.

The weakness of this sentimental work lies partly in the depiction of alcoholism as the cause of nearly all unhappiness in life, but at least in a few places the author truthfully

demonstrates the connection between alcoholism and the arduous economic conditions in which the hero has found himself. It is precisely the lack of work that forces him to try to improve his mood with the help of wine. Much later, the poet was to lay the blame for alcoholism on employers who force workers to do repellent work. In Whitman's stories one often comes across scenes that demonstrate vividly the humane feelings of the author, but at that time Whitman was still not capable of rising above the level of melodrama and of drawing convincing human characters.

The "New Orleans Theory" and Other Matters

Of course, a writing career initiated in this fashion could hardly be called propitious. The delicate fountain of poetry born in Whitman's soul while he was still almost a boy seemed to have quickly dried up.

By the turn of the forties the young poet had published about a dozen poems, but in the next eight years less than half as many saw the light of day. Soon he ceased printing prose works as well.

As he approached thirty, Whitman must have felt that he had failed both as a poet and as a story-writer. But quite soon he began to write the verses which were eventually to make up the book *Leaves of Grass.* This happened at the very end of the forties.

Where then is the link connecting verses like "We All Shall Rest At Last" with the magnificent "Europe", published in 1850? How were "My Departure" and a melodramatic novella about a father who hates his son transformed into "Song of Myself"? What was it that so unexpectedly (or does it only seem that way?) made a poet of Walt Whitman when he reached the age of thirty? I am not the first to ask this question. There is probably no study of Whitman's life and work in which it does not arise. The way in which many authors in America answer this question is characteristic, however, of much that is weak in bourgeois literary criticism.

The theory "explaining" the instantaneous transformation of Whitman into a poet which was advanced more than half a century ago by the American critic Henry Binns was naive, but still not obnoxious. In his book on Whitman Binns disclosed several new facts about the poet's life and depicted him with

genuine sympathy; but what makes the work noteworthy in the history of Whitman studies is that the so-called New Orleans hypothesis makes its appearance here for the first time.

In 1848, having lost his job once again, Whitman accepted an invitation to work for a new paper which had been started by a group of businessmen in New Orleans. Now, Binns tries to convince us that Whitman went to New Orleans an average journalist and returned a few months later a genuine poet, and all because during his stay in that beautiful southern city he fell in love with some unknown woman. This love, apparently, determined all of Whitman's subsequent development, and made him a true poet.

As Binns puts it, "It seems that about this time Walt formed an intimate relationship with some woman of higher social rank than his own ... that she became the mother of his child ... and that he was prevented by some obstacle ... from marriage...."[1]

Followers of Binns have supplemented his "theory" with many romantic details. Some say that the woman Whitman loved with such an overwhelming passion occupied a higher social niche, and therefore he could not marry her. Others assert just the opposite: that she belonged to a lower social cast and this was what prevented the poet from marrying her.

The idea that sufferings in New Orleans born of love were the major factor in the rise of Whitman the poet has been developed by many critics. Among the many biographers to write of Whitman's "purifying" love for the beautiful New Orleans creole (after all, why shouldn't she be a creole?) are the American critic Holloway, the French critic Bazalgette and Bailey, an English historian of literature.

Binns' theory may perhaps appear attractive but the trouble is that nobody can point to unquestionable facts supporting it. Absolutely nothing is known about this mysterious woman. Gay Allen, one of Whitman's most recent American biographers, who collected a great deal of data on the poet's life, admits that not one concrete fact has ever been unearthed to support this romantic fiction.

Of course, it goes without saying that Whitman was a man far removed from monkish inclinations. Nothing human was alien to him. Whitman was neither a puritan nor a hypocrite.

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[1] H. Binns, *A Life of Walt Whitman*, N. Y., Haskell, 1969, p. 51.

When in the mid-seventies, the poet heard of the death of the gifted actress and authoress Ada Clare, whom he had known since before the war, he wrote to a friend: "Poor, poor, Ada Clare — I have been inexpressibly shocked by the horrible & sudden close of her gay, easy, sunny free, loose, but *not ungood* life...."[1]

Nothing is known about the women the poet loved when quite young. Whitman was extremely unwilling to share his intimate secrets with others. Not long before his death, however, the poet said in answer to a correspondent's questions that his love-life in his youth, and even later, was certainly not above reproach.

It is perfectly possible that Whitman really did love a woman whom he could not marry for reasons unknown to us. Nevertheless, it must be emphasized that it is simply a product of fantasy to claim that all this took place in the spring of 1848 in New Orleans and that it was precisely this love which called forth *Leaves of Grass.*

Critics have also spent a great deal of time and effort trying to impress upon their readers the idea that at the end of the forties Whitman underwent some kind of "mystical" illumination, which instantaneously transformed a common journalist into a great poet. This theory was put forward many years ago by Richard Bucke, who wrote that in his thirties (as, he says, was the case with all founders of religions) Whitman was possessed by some sort of cosmic influence. Apparently this occurred not in 1848, but five or six years later. Whitman's brain, like that of other mystics, was supposedly affected by some sort of Brahmanic radiance which forever illuminated his life.

This view of the mystic Bucke, though he was a friend of Whitman, would probably not be worth remembering if it were not for the fact that even today he has a considerable following. Among the supporters of the "mystical theory" concerning the origin of Whitman's poetic genius we find, for instance, the well-known American literary critic Mark Van Doren. At the end of the Second World War he wrote: "Biographers speculate concerning a mystical experience around the year 1850. There was one, but the nature of it cannot be known."[2]

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[1] W. Whitman, *The Correspondence*, Vol. II, p. 285.
[2] *Walt Whitman*, Sel. by M. Van Doren, N. Y., Viking Press, 1945, p. 6.

The theory of "mystical illumination" has gained even wider circulation in the United States quite recently. For instance, in his book *A Critical Guide to "Leaves of Grass"* (1957), James E. Miller Jr. builds his whole analysis of the "structure" of the poem "Song of Myself" on the premise that Whitman was an accomplished mystic, and that this fact determined the "structure" and even the essence of his work.

However, the "mystical" explanation of the sources of Whitman's poetry is not the latest novelty in American Whitman studies. Several historians of literature are nowadays inclined to view the birth of the poet's creative powers in frankly psychopathological terms. Critics of the Freudian school seek the key to Whitman's genius in his supposed homosexual inclinations. Again it must be said that no one has been able to adduce actual facts confirming such hypotheses. In Whitman's verse and prose the sun shines brilliantly and a fresh wind blows; his works breathe naturalness and purity.

The attitudes of some American critics are rather graphically set forth in the works of Richard Chase. From the undeniable fact that the poet underwent considerable hardships in the course of his life and, specifically, that he had to change his jobs fairly often, Chase has built up the image of a neurotic. Whitman's journey through life, Chase alleges, consisted of "a series of advances and retreats" connected with the state of his nerves. This, according to Chase, was what made Whitman a poet. The American critic phrases his conclusion as follows: "The emergence of Whitman's genius may be understood as the consequence of his having failed, because of neurotic disturbances, to make terms with the world." [1]

Here we can agree with only one point, that Whitman really did have difficulty in making "terms with the world". He was not a very accommodating man, not much inclined to compromise.

Once Again Into the Forties

What, then, did happen to Whitman at the end of the forties? Remember, that at the beginning of the decade he wrote extremely traditional verse and very soon fell almost

[1] *Leaves of Grass. One Hundred Years After*, Ed. by M. Hindus,Stanford, Cal., Stanford Univ. Press, 1955, p. 52.

completely silent. And then, in 1847, Whitman first committed to paper lines which recall those later contained in *Leaves of Grass*. The first poem actually included in this book was not to be published until 1850. *Leaves of Grass* saw the light of day five years later.

Of course, Whitman's poetic talent was born long before this. The youth was attracted to poetry very early in life. The charm of his native plains, the expanse of the ocean which opened from the hills of Long Island, folk songs, stories told by his mother and by the village shepherds when Walt was a child,—all these aroused poetic feelings in him. The tendency to think in images, a sense of rhythm, an attraction to verse and a skillful wielding of the pen in general—all this was to some degree Whitman's even before 1847. And then, of course, certain important principles were typical of the poet early in life—democratic leanings, faith in simple Americans, in farmers with trousers spattered with manure, city mechanics or fishermen.

Nevertheless, the forties did mark a turning point for Whitman. Just what happened to him at that time, what helped to make Whitman a real poet, will become clearer as we analyze the course of his life throughout the decade, the evolution of Whitman's ideas, as we look at the things that troubled or excited him.

It must be kept in mind that the forties was a time of great change in the history of the North American republic.

In the summer of 1841, when Whitman was twenty-two, reports appeared in two New York newspapers (among them the *New York Post*, one of the most respected organs of the press at that time, edited by the poet Bryant) of a speech made by a certain Walter Whitman. In the paper the *New Era*, the following words of this speaker, at a meeting called by the Democratic Party, were quoted: "We are battling for great principles—for mighty and glorious truths. I would scorn to exert even my humble efforts for the best democratic candidate that ever was nominated, in himself alone."[1] These rather traditional words concealed a complex content.

Not long before this, Whitman had become convinced that there was nothing left for him to do in the villages of Long

[1] *The Uncollected Poetry and Prose...*, Vol. I, p. 51.

Island, and he moved to New York again, this time to stay there for the foreseeable future. The young man immediately became involved in the political life of the city and apparently was sufficienly well-known to the local leaders of the Democrats for his devotion to their party to be invited to make a public speech. Of course, there was nothing unexpected in Walt Whitman's publicly declaring himself a supporter of the Democratic Party; he would not hesitate in choosing between the Whigs and the Democrats. Like his father and many American farmers, workers and craftsmen, the political novice regarded with alarm the doings of big businessmen. Whitman aimed at preserving, as far as possible, "good old ways", the ways of the farmer.

Mistrust of wealthy people and of the future which their domination meant for the country was one of the main features of the philosophy of life millions of Democrats shared. In the Democratic Party itself, however, a very important role was played by elements who were far from democratic.

Both parties had loyal supporters in the northern and southern states. Without qualifying the statement, we could not describe the Whigs as the party of the Northerners, and the Democrats as the party of the Southerners.

Still, the fact remains that the southern plantation owners wielded a particularly great influence in the Democratic Party. Politically active Democrats from the southern states opposed the slightest attempts at any restriction of the power of the slave-owners. Moreover, they had the support of the northern bosses of the Democratic Party, especially of those whose economic interests were directly or indirectly tied up with the production of cotton.

However, the poet could not yet understand this, just as many other Americans from the lower classes still had not discerned the real nature of the northern Democratic leaders. In the early forties slavery still was not regarded by millions of Americans, even in the North, as an intolerable evil.

The struggle against slavery in the United States dated back to the birth of the republic. During the War of Independence and immediately after, this struggle reached fairly large proportions. At the beginning of the nineteenth century, however, the movement lost its former impetus. The Negroes rose up against slavery time and time again, but received little or no support from the whites.

In his book *William Lloyd Garrison and His Times* (1880), devoted largely to the biography of one of the leaders of the abolitionist movement in the United States, Oliver Johnson, himself a notable abolitionist, wrote that at the end of the twenties of last century "there was hardly a ripple of excitement about slavery in any part of the nation. The fathers of the Republic had fallen asleep; the Anti-Slavery sentiment of the country ... had become too feeble to utter even a whisper. From one year's end to another there was scarcely a newspaper in all the land that made the slightest allusion to the subject.... The cotton traffic had become immensely profitable.... The still, small voice of conscience was overwhelmed by the hoarse clamors of avarice.... Pulpit and press were generally silent".[1]

It is true that the abolitionist society founded by Garrison, who also set up an anti-slavery newspaper, the *Liberator*, at the beginning of the thirties, attracted to its ranks hundreds of supporters from all parts of the country, including the South. It is also true that some heroic people, paying no attention to threats (several abolitionists paid with their lives for their convictions), helped Negroes escape from the southern states, made speeches and published pamphlets demanding civil rights for slaves. Workers who belonged to unions had long been protesting against slavery. Despite all this, the sad picture drawn by Johnson corresponded, on the whole, to the actual situation.

Many years later, when the war between the North and the South had ended, Whitman was to say that rotten and dangerous elements had begun to play a noticeable part in the leadership of the Democratic Party long before the war. However, at the beginning of the forties he was not, as yet, acutely aware of the danger lurking in the protective attitude of the most powerful Democrats towards the institution of slavery. He was still far from aligning himself fully with abolitionists. It is a curious fact that in the novel *Franklin Evans* Negro slavery is mentioned without the slighest hint of criticism.

Those are the facts. Nevertheless, Whitman's words about his faithfulness to "great principles" were spoken sincerely. The young man from the backwoods did not belong to the

[1] O. Johnson, *William Lloyd Garrison and His Times*, Boston, B. B. Russell, 1880, pp. 21-22.

ranks of politicians prepared to stoop to anything for the sake of "making good". Whitman took his stand because he really believed in certain noble principles, although his understanding of the situation at which the country had arrived was obviously limited. He soon was to demonstrate his faithfulness to these "great principles" in practice.

Whitman and "Great Principles"

In the forties Walt Whitman was first and foremost a journalist, a newspaper editor. The list of periodicals for which he worked during this decade is extremely long—the *Aurora*, the *Tattler*, the *Democrat*, the Brooklyn *Eagle*, the *Brooklyn Freeman*, and many others.

Attempts by literary historians to seek out collections of the publications on which the poet worked over a hundred years ago have met with only partial success. Some of Whitman's articles were reprinted only in 1950. The first issue of the *Brooklyn Freeman* was considered lost for almost a century.

What was the American press of the eighteen-forties like? Charles Dickens visited the United States when Whitman was beginning his career in journalism in New York. In *Martin Chuzzlewit* and other works Dickens describes the typical American newspaper of the time in a manner which, while grotesque, was basically accurate. The typical American newspaper reflected a life abounding in violence and bloodshed, was filled with crudity, dirt and slander. Its "news" contained one drop of truth for each bucketful of deceit. When Martin Chuzzlewit disembarks in New York, his ears are assailed by the cries of boys hawking newspapers. The choice is quite wide: "New York Sewer", "New York Family Spy", "New York Keyhole", "New York Plunderer", etc.

Of course, not all American newspapers were of this kind. Whitman knew of several publications inspired by lofty thoughts and noble ideals. One might recall, of course, the *Free Enquirer*. Bryant conducted a bold defense of democratic ideas in his paper. The abolitionist press was imbued with a spirit of heroism. Even so, the style of the gutter press had its influence even on some honest American journalists.

The budding politician Whitman had sometimes assailed his opponents with a lack of restraint which would have embarrassed the liveliest of European journalists.

For instance, in 1840, on the eve of the elections, a dispute took place between a certain Whig and the Democrat Whitman. The local Whig paper in reporting the downfall of the "champion of democracy" (more than likely, a case of wishful thinking) quoted indignantly his characterization of the Whig opponent as a liar and a scoundrel. Further on, there was a declaration that for one more such outburst he would be given a sound hiding. In answering his competitors' paper on the pages of the organ of the Democrats, Whitman not only refused to apologize for his rudeness, but made use of other expressions in the same vein. Later on Whitman also was not averse to employing very strong language in his attacks on political opponents.

But let us examine what irked the Democrat Whitman in his debate with a Whig and why he ignored the threat of reprisals. It seems that Whitman's wrath was to a large degree justified. An accusation had been made concerning the leader of the Democrats, Van Buren, which was not only untrue, but rather clearly revealed the class essence of the Whigs' position. This was a position which Whitman could not but regard with extreme distaste. The American Whigs, startled by the hostility with which rank and file Democrats regarded their "respectable" and prosperous opponents, spread slanderous rumors, which were picked up and used even in the tiniest villages of Long Island. It was claimed that Van Buren wanted to introduce communal ownership not only of property, but of wives and children as well. There is no doubt that Whitman had good reason to be angry....

The first paper which employed Whitman after his speech in defense of the Democrats was the *Aurora*. A great many new periodicals had appeared almost simultaneously in New York at the beginning of the decade, and the daily *Aurora* was not among the best of them. In fact the *Aurora* was rather distinguished for its familiarity of tone, predilection for sensation and cheap "aristocratism". The first editor of the paper, Thomas Nichols, quite frankly set himself the aim of creating a kind of mirror of the life of the New York *beau monde*. He called the *Aurora* "the Court Journal of our democratic aristocracy".[1] This meant that politics received less

[1] *Walt Whitman of the New York Aurora*, Ed. by J. J. Rubin and Ch. H. Brown, State College, Pa, Bald Eagle Press 1950, p. 2.

attention in the *Aurora* than society gossip, and news from Europe was squeezed out by local scandals.

The man who preceded Whitman as editor of the newspaper was so active and unconstrained that soon the owners began to fear that the paper would be charged with libel, and so fired him. The post of leading editor was given, as announced in the issue for March 28, 1842, to "Mr. Walter Whitman, favorably known as a bold, energetic and original writer...".[1]

This announcement was in many ways typical of the newspaper for which Whitman was starting work. In the first place, the owners of the *Aurora* knew this "original writer" too little to grace him with such a flattering title. Secondly, the announcement about the post of leading editor was a lie, since Whitman was the only editor of the paper. In fact, the whole permanent staff of the *Aurora* consisted of him and one crime reporter. Society news was supplied by free-lance workers, at the rate of one cent per line.

The editor of the *Aurora* was not yet 23. A photograph of him taken about this time has been preserved. Whitman is shown as a young man with an elegant beard. The young journalist probably wore a top-hat and did not scorn to carry a cane. A contemporary of his testified that his buttonhole was almost always adorned with a flower.

Whitman well understood what his readers expected of him, he sported the manner of a man of the world, an idler and joker. Many of his articles in the *Aurora* were narratives about himself — about his walks in the town, chance meetings and comical incidents. The editor actually declared to the public that his job was to give the readers "something *piquant*, and something solid, and something sentimental and something humorous...".[2] (Later he was to say that the *Aurora* was "a trashy, scurrilous, and obscene daily paper....")[3]

However, New York life at the beginning of the forties did not fit into the framework of this "piquant" scheme. Although Whitman wrote in jest that when he went out walking after lunch, children stepped aside to make way for him because he was obviously a "gentleman", he was not only concerned about his appearance. Though not much troubled then by the lot of

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[1] *Walt Whitman of the New York Aurora*, p. 2.
[2] Ibid., p. 4.
[3] Ibid., p. 13.

the Negroes, this follower of Jefferson and Wright held such a basic principle of bourgeois democracy as the separation of church and state very close to his heart.

It so happened that the Roman Catholic Bishop John Hughes thought to take advantage of the arrival of a large number of Irish immigrants in the United States to obtain a subsidy for the church schools from the city funds. The leaders of Tammany Hall were in favor of his request. They agreed to support the school bill because the votes of the Irish were greatly needed.

When this happened, the editor of the *Aurora* suddenly abandoned his light and humorous tone. Rolling up his sleeves, he jumped straight into the fray with Hughes and those Democrats who had sided with him. Once more Whitman declined to choose polite terms of expression. He did not wish to use pretty words when the talk concerned unclean doings.

Quite unexpectedly for himself, the "leading editor" found himself in a rather ticklish situation. At this very time a chauvinist organization of Native Americans supporting racial "purity" was being set up in the United States. Speaking in the name of "genuine" Americans, these racists defamed all immigrants, especially Irish Roman Catholics. His instinctive democratic feelings, however, soon helped Whitman to find his bearings in the situation. It is true that he criticized the leaders of the Irish Catholics in the United States, but he refused to side with the reactionaries who persecuted all immigrants. The editor found it necessary to dissociate himself from such politics in a special article.

Less than a year after Whitman expressed his faith in "great principles", life itself put his words to the test. On the eve of current elections the editor of the *Aurora* faced a serious dilemma: should he remain faithful, in spite of everything, to the Democratic candidates, or condemn the New York leaders of the Democratic Party, who had betrayed the principle of separation of church and state? He found the courage to overlook "local interests of party" [1] in the name of democracy, and this so resolutely that he actually expressed his joy at the defeat of Tammany Hall at the polls.

Then an incident which would be repeated over and over again during the forties occurred: the editor devoted too

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[1] Ibid., p. 7.

wholeheartedly to democratic principles was shown the door by the owners of the paper.

The publishers of the *Aurora* attempted to conceal the real political reasons for Whitman's dismissal. Only a few weeks earlier they had called Whitman an "energetic" writer, but in May 1842 there appeared in the *Aurora* an article containing the following words: "There is a man about our office so lazy that it takes two men to open his jaws when he speaks.... *What* can be done with him?" [1]

The claim that it was hard to force Whitman to speak proved none too happy an invention. It would have been truer to say that it was impossible to force him to be quiet. Whitman's answer to the attacks of Herrick and Ropes, the owners of the *Aurora*, came in the *Tattler*, with an extremely vivid list of all of their failings, which he knew very well indeed.

It was at this time, having lost his gainful employment as editor of a New York daily newspaper, that, in an effort to earn a living, Whitman undertook the composition of a book in praise of sobriety.

One paper after another, sentimental or "horrific" stories, articles on local topics, sometimes written simply because the columns of a paper had to be filled with something or other — this was how things went almost to the end of the forties.

Among the articles Whitman published while working on the *Evening Tattler* there were (as there had been while he was on the *Aurora*) unassuming descriptions of walks through the town. At the same time, the conflict with the publishers of that "trashy" paper continued. Quite in the spirit of the newspapers satirized by Dickens, the owners of the *Aurora* called their former editor a "pretty pup" guilty of "indolence, incompetence, loaferism" [2], etc.

Whitman paid them back in kind, characterizing his former employers as "dirty fellows" who were ignorant "of their own ignorance". [3] They were tramps, the incarnation of the foulest egoism, blackmailers, etc.

Whitman did not stay long on the *Tattler* either. The reasons for this are not known, but here is what G. W. Allen, who is far from inclined to emphasize the poet's rebellious tendencies,

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[1] *Walt Whitman of the New York Aurora*, p. 12.
[2] Ibid.
[3] Ibid., p. 13.

wrote about Whitman's leaving the *New York Democrat*: "... there can be little doubt that he was ousted by the 'Old Hunker' politicians, the first of several defeats that he would suffer at their hands."[1] In fact, it cannot be called the first, if we recall the circumstances involved in his dismissal from the *Aurora*, but it is true that further encounters with reactionary politicians awaited the young journalist.

Whitman worked as editor of the *New York Democrat* in the mid-forties. By this time differences of opinion in the ranks of the Democratic Party, which later led to a split, were already quite apparent. The leaders of the northern Democrats were ever more ready to follow the dictates of the southern Democrats in support of slavery. This caused resentment among those Americans who had not forgotten that even some of the "fathers" of the republic had seen in slavery something inimical to democracy.

Conservatives mockingly called those who were ready to "undermine the foundations" "Barnburners". Everybody knew the joke about the farmer who wanted to rid himself of rats, and burned the barn infested by them to the ground. In the same way, "respectable people" reasoned, these hot-heads, in their attempt to get rid of shortcomings, were ready to set the country on fire and destroy it. Nevertheless, the movement of the "Barnburners" (they took up this nickname with pride) attracted more and more Democrats.

"America's Most Stormily Human Period of History"

The late eighteen-forties was a most important period in the history of the world. In many European countries it was a time of revolution. E. L. Masters in his book about Whitman remarked that "as Whitman tried to sing America ... the Communist Manifesto of 1848 was spreading its influence over the Western World".[2]

In America, too, events of earth-shaking significance took place, but only a very few American writers were able to understand the tremendous revolutionary import of the

[1] G. W. Allen, *The Solitary Singer*, p. 65.
[2] E. L. Masters, *Whitman*, N. Y., Biblo and Tannen, 1968, p. 106.

period when the first of Whitman's poems, published later in *Leaves of Grass*, were created.

Some scholars link the appearance of Whitman's book to economic advance in the United States in the eighteen-fifties. One literary man who was more discerning in his judgement was Carl Sandburg. This poet emphasized that the author of *Leaves of Grass* "wrote his vital passages at the height of America's most stormily human period of history".[1]

Various tendencies, sometimes diametrically opposed, interwove and clashed in the United States in the mid-nineteenth century. Merchants grew rich, new factories sprang up, bankers acquired more and more influence. At the same time, the slave owners of the southern states stubbornly refused to give ground. If anything, they behaved more aggressively than ever before. By continually expanding the areas where slave labor was used, hindering the growth of industry and of the capitalist order of things in general, and fettering the North politically, the plantation owners of the South obstructed, in a fairly obvious way, the development of the productive forces of the country. The abolition of slavery was urgently demanded by the basic interests of capitalists in New England as well as New York, Ohio, Pennsylvania and other northern and western sections of the United States. But most consistent of all in their struggle against slavery were the American farmers, artisans and workers.

From the late forties their political activity grew year by year. The hatred of the working people of the northern and western states and territories for the southern plantation owners was to a large extent determined by the antagonistic interests of these Americans in relation to the cardinal problem in the country's life, the problem of land. For the American people it took on supreme importance.

"... The agrarian question at that time," Lenin wrote, "had been brought to the fore by the course of the American social movement...."[2]

It was during the forties that a stubborn struggle developed between the tenant-farmers and the great landowners of the state of New York, descendants of the first Dutch settlers.

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[1] W. Whitman, *Leaves of Grass*, Introduction by C. Sandburg, N. Y, Random House, 1944, p. VIII.

[2] V. I. Lenin, *Collected Works*, Moscow, Vol. 8, p 323.

Having inherited immense holdings, these landowners exacted an excessively high rent from the tenants; the enmity towards the extortionists at times produced something that looked like rebellions.

Incomparably more important, however, were the fundamental differences between millions of farmers, artisans and workers in the northern states and the big plantation owners of the South. At the basis of the conflict lay the question of who was to own the huge areas of territory still unoccupied in the West of the country.

The new republic had endless expanses of land still undivided into private lots, and it seemed that it would be possible to give farms to everybody. Even those who had never considered taking up agriculture felt that a farm of their own could be a sheet anchor in the event of a failure in town. Other people instinctively felt that the development of individual farming would postpone the aggravation of the ills wrought by developing capitalism.

There were very many people who favored the idea of dividing the unoccupied government lands (either free or for a nominal price) in the form of homesteads among all those who wanted them. This demand was democratic in nature, though its content was bourgeois. But the movement for the division of the western lands among small farmers threatened to undermine the foundations of slave-run plantations and enraged the planters. No matter how quickly the reserves of unoccupied land expanded, the appetite of the southern landowners grew still more quickly. The slave owners were most active in opposing the realization of the democratic masses' dream of homesteads. It is quite understandable, therefore, that the struggle for land and the anti-slavery movement were closely linked.

In order to understand more clearly the historically progressive significance of the mounting struggle for land on the American continent on the eve of the Civil War, let us recall the appraisal made by Marx and Lenin of the views of Hermann Kriege, a German who emigrated to America during the forties. In a journal which Kriege began to publish in the United States, he proposed the idea of redistributing the land, which he thought was possible under American conditions.

Citing Kriege's pronouncements in his article "Marx on the American 'General Redistribution'", Lenin remarked that here

was "a real plan for an American general redistribution: the withdrawal of a vast land expanse from commerce, the securing of title to the land, limitation of the extent of landownership or land tenure."[1]

But Kriege insisted that his idea was a communist idea. And this, of course, roused Marx to indignation and protest. In his article Lenin notes that Marx quite correctly subjects Kriege's utopianism to sober criticism. Lenin, however, goes further: "But it would be a great mistake to think that the utopian dreams of the participants in the movement caused Marx to adopt a negative attitude to the movement in general.... Marx was able to extract the real and progressive content of a movement from its tawdry ideological trappings."[2] He was far from merely repudiating this petty-bourgeois movement and saw the significance of "the revolutionary aspect of the attack on private property in land".[3]

As it developed, the abolitionist movement also took on a more and more obvious revolutionary character. The link between the struggle for land in the United States and the struggle against slavery is mentioned, for instance, in a letter which Marx wrote to Abraham Lincoln during the Civil War. This "dire epopee," Marx pointed out, had its beginning in the struggle for land, which was "to decide whether the virgin soil of immense tracts should be wedded to the labour of the emigrant or prostituted by the tramp of the slave-driver...."[4]

In the struggle for the liberation of the Negroes, the most progressive elements of the northern bourgeoisie made common cause with the people. Nevertheless, as was correctly observed by one abolitionist, even in New England, the center of the struggle against slavery, the abolitionist movement recruited its members mostly from the common people. In his book *The Negro People in American History*, William Foster points out that bourgeois circles were long unappreciative of the work of their revolutionary vanguard, the middle-class abolitionists. Indisputable facts show that during the decades immediately preceding the war between the North and the

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[1] V. I. Lenin, op. cit., p. 324.
[2] Ibid., p. 324.
[3] Ibid., p. 328.
[4] *The General Council of the First International, 1864-1866, Minutes*, Moscow, 1964, p. 52.

South prominent public figures of the American bourgeoisie made deal after deal with the southerners.

In the middle of the nineteenth century the realization of the American way (as Lenin later characterized it) of capitalist development in agriculture hung in the balance. Working Americans linked their hopes for freedom and well-being with the struggle for land and against slavery; it seemed to them that victory over the plantation owners would turn the United States into a country of farmers and artisans, content with their lot. For some time Whitman also shared these illusions.

The basic economic causes of the mounting anti-slavery movement in the United States are fairly evident, but of course, the most progressive Americans fought slavery not only for economic reasons. In the hearts of honest, steadfast abolitionists burnt a fervid love of freedom. They were genuinely concerned with securing human rights for men and women, irrespective of the color of their skins. They were inspired by humanism.

Whitman attended stormy meetings in defense of Negroes on more than one occasion. Later he would often recall these crowded meetings addressed by leaders of the anti-slavery movement. Among them were Garrison, the bold abolitionist Wendell Phillips, who was held in high esteem by the founders of Marxism, and Frederick Douglass. From these and other men supporting the immediate liberation of the slaves, Whitman learned to fight fearlessly for the lofty goals of emancipation.

He listened attentively and joyfully to the magnificent speeches for which the leaders of the abolitionists were so famous. In his old age, the poet recounted how a certain member of Tammany Hall, with the help of the most vicious elements of New York, led attacks on anti-slavery meetings. But, wrote Whitman with pride, the abolitionists defended themselves bravely and never gave ground.

The Brooklyn *Eagle*

A change in the attitude of millions of Americans to the doings of the slave owners — from vague indifference to wrathful indignation and attempts to thwart them — found dramatic expression at the very end of the forties and the beginning of the fifties. But serious shifts had already been

noticeable in the winter of 1846-47. It was at this same time that Walt Whitman's view of the world also underwent a significant change. In less than two years, from early 1846 to the first days of 1848, when the poet was editing the daily newspaper the Brooklyn *Eagle*, the main local organ of the Democratic Party, which had been in power in the United States for many years, he became, in many respects, a new man.

When, after the death of the paper's editor in February 1846, Whitman was invited to take his place, he accepted the job—one may assume—without much hesitation. The offer was very flattering, since the editor of the Brooklyn *Eagle* held a prominent position in the city, and the young journalist could have no objection in principle to working on the paper. True, Whitman had argued, sometimes bitterly, with the leaders of the Democratic Party in Brooklyn and New York, but he had remained a loyal Democrat.

Whitman was tied to the Democratic Party by his undimmed affection for the memory of Jackson, whom he had considered a noble old man with a simple soul. Like most other Democrats, the new editor of the Brooklyn *Eagle* was against certain measures which people with money longed to force through in the United States. But as before, he rarely thought much about the fact that the Democratic Party was becoming a steady supporter of slavery.

Like other American dailies of the time, the Brooklyn *Eagle* consisted of four pages, filled largely with advertizing. Since Whitman was the only editorial worker (although it is quite possible that he made use of a reporter for some time) he had to do almost everything that was necessary to get the paper out. He composed leading and feature articles, prepared the "news" (mostly on the basis of other publications), provided purely literary material, took part in polemics, and was responsible for proof-reading. The editor did his job conscientiously: when there was a shortage of material, he would reprint his old verses and prose writings (the novel *Franklin Evans* received a new title in the Brooklyn *Eagle*—*A Tale of Long-Island. Fortunes of a Country-Boy*).

The paper freely indulged in abuse directed at rival organs of the press. In the first place, the editor of the *Brooklyn Advertiser* was a Whig, and in the second place, he had expressed doubts about Whitman's knowledge of grammar....

In Whitman's paper one could read about the arrival in the United States of a famous inpressario with an astounding dwarf and about what was supposedly the only living orangoutang in England or America. Nor did the editor of the Brooklyn *Eagle* attempt to hide his delight in the achievements of American technology, which allowed you to travel by train to a town 100 miles from Brooklyn and back again all in one day.

Once he composed a highly traditional ode dedicated to Independence Day (it could be sung to the tune of "The Star-Spangled Banner"). It seemed that life in the United States was moving on quietly and peacefully, in an established groove, but all the while events of the greatest import were taking place in the country.

The United States of America had long had its eye on the highly fertile and under-populated lands of neighboring Mexico, a country which was then considerably larger than present-day Mexico. The most determined supporters of the annexation of at least part of the Mexican lands were the plantation owners, but some northerners also campaigned for the expansion of American territory. Shortly before, in 1845, the Americans had decided on the official annexation of Texas, seized from the Mexicans many years earlier. Eventually Texas was turned into a slave state. But Mexico still possessed an even more dainty morsel—California.

Whitman was only getting into his stride as editor when American soldiers invaded Mexican territory. Military operations began between the United States and Mexico, though the formal declaration of war was made much later. There can be no doubt as to the expansionist nature of American military actions in Mexico. Not all honest Americans grasped immediately what was going on, but the feeling that the United States had launched on a venture of conquest began to disturb more and more people.

Lincoln, the future president, was an opponent of the war with Mexico; he pointed out in his speeches that the bloodshed was only to the advantage of the slave owners who wanted new land where they could use the labor of their black-skinned human cattle.

Douglass considered the war disgraceful and unjust, and it goes without saying that the other abolitionists also protested against it. The workers' organizations sharply condemned the unjust war.

Soon after military operations began, the poet James Russell Lowell published some brilliant satirical verses attacking the war. In "The Biglow Papers" (first series) Lowell made use of the language of poorly educated farmers to mock "them thet rule us, them slave-traders",[1] and at the same time castigated the "Yankee renegaders" who were ready to help create on Mexican land "bigger pens to cram with slaves".

Speaking to the soldiers, the poet exclaimed,

> *'Taint your eppylettes an' feathers*
> *Make the thing a grain more right....*[2]

Emerson was also revolted by the war with Mexico. In his "Ode" the United States are depicted as a country which does no more than prattle about culture. Was not the poet's homeland tormenting Mexico with armed force? Such were the spoken and written reactions of the brightest minds of America more than 100 years ago.

It is worth noting that, according to the testimony of G. W. Allen, some present-day historians are beginning to justify the American president's views at that time and to rationalize his actions. Several literary critics in the United States have attempted to support their case by referring to Whitman, whom they depict as an extreme expansionist. Thus, for instance, H. S. Canby wrote that "Whitman grew up in the Great Expansion of the thirties, the forties, the fifties"[3] and that *Leaves of Grass* expresses "a young expansionist mind in an expansionist country".[4] In some books Whitman is shown as a consistent supporter of the war with Mexico, from beginning to end.

The real situation was quite different. There is no doubt that the war found Whitman far from a convinced abolitionist, and that he did not immediately oppose annexation. But during the Mexican war, Whitman's ideas and views, together with those of American working people, underwent serious development.

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[1] *The Democratic Spirit*, Ed. by B. Smith, N. Y., Knopf, 1941, p. 352.
[2] Ibid., p. 353.
[3] H. S. Canby, *Walt Whitman*, N. Y., Literary Classics, 1943, p. 327.
[4] Ibid., p. 48.

When the battles began, Van Anden, the owner of the Brooklyn *Eagle*,, who belonged to the conservative wing of the Democrats, apparently had good reason to be pleased with his new editor. The editorials written by Whitman just after the American troops had crossed the border made the Mexicans out to be the blackest of villains. The editor accused them of being ready to execute hundreds of people; he spoke of the tyranny within Mexico and openly advocated seizure of Mexican territory. Such articles probably reflected the feelings of those Americans (even poor ones) who in their dreams of owning a lot of land were able to contemplate, without any qualms of conscience, American territorial expansion at the expense of their neighbors.

Sometimes Whitman attempted to justify the actions of the American army by the prospect of a republican order which would be established on the newly acquired territories in place of the monarchy. He wanted to convince his readers (and himself as well) that once having seized Mexican land, his fellow-countrymen would introduce a liberal form of government and free the people of their shackles. After all, was not his country providing humanity with a new and free way of life?

At first Whitman saw no relation between the war with Mexico and the interests of the slave owners, and was not inclined to attack the planters on this account. Nevertheless, the owner of the Brooklyn *Eagle* was probably even then not fully satisfied with his editor. The fact is that Whitman took it into his head to devote one of his first leading articles ("Slavers—and the Slave Trade") to a most dangerous subject. He condemned the import of slaves into the United States via the countries of South America. Ostensibly there was nothing seditious about this, since the author seemed only to be urging observance of the laws which forbade the import of human beings as slaves. But in the article he was not only expressing concern at the contravention of existing legislation. He was worried by the inhumanity of the very institution of slavery.

Whitman gave a scathing description of a ship which carried Negro slaves. There was unbelievably little floor space for each slave. "Are you sick of the description?" wrote the editor of the Brooklyn *Eagle*, "O, this is not all, by a good sight. Imagine neither food nor water given these hapless prisoners ...

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dozens of the poor wretches dying, and others already dead...."[1]

Van Anden had reason to be perturbed. Not only was the article written with passion, but the author tackled the problems in a manner which was dangerous for the slave owners. In exposing the smugglers he attacked not only those who were foreigners, but American slave traders as well. He also condemned attempts to justify slavery by conditions supposedly existing in Africa from time immemorial. The editor knew that wars between African tribes, as a result of which the vanquished were sold into slavery, were engineered by the whites. The author of the article demanded that the law make provision for the punishment not merely of the "sailor on the sea", but also of the "cowardly rich villain, and speculator on the land...".[2]

The war with Mexico went on, and the paper still seemed to support it, but soon new notes began to appear in Whitman's deliberations on the subject. His articles called on the reader to pay attention to public opinion, and public opinion was against the war. The editor, recently in such a militant mood, now began to emphasize that peaceful conquests were much nobler than conquests by force of arms. And then he suddenly came up with the demand to do everything possible to bring the war with Mexico to an end.

Shortly after the new year, in 1847, the Brooklyn *Eagle* quite bluntly proposed ending the war. In one of his articles Whitman wrote: "... the time ... has arrived when all citizens should speak candidly and firmly on this subject of the Mexican War. *Let it go no further!*"[3]

American literary critics quite often ignore all this. But facts tell an incontrovertible story: after his first year of work on the Brooklyn *Eagle*, the views of the new editor on the war changed. The reason was, first and foremost, that the problem of the war became intertwined with that of slavery.

The time was close when the fruits of the successful American military operations would be harvested. In Washington, preparations were being made to declare vast territories that had been wrenched away from a weak country, the

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[1] W. Whitman, *The Gathering of the Forces*, N. Y. and Lnd., Putnam's Sons, 1920, pp. 188-89.
[2] Ibid., p. 190.
[3] Ibid., p. 255.

property of the United States. But suddenly a very serious obstacle confronted the slave owners who were impatiently awaiting this outcome.

David Wilmot, a Congressman from the northern state of Pennsylvania, introduced a resolution that became known as the Wilmot Proviso, according to which slavery was to be excluded from the new territory.

This threatened the plantation owners and their northern allies with genuine catastrophe. Wilmot was preparing to take away a gigantic piece of land from the slave owners. In fact, the question of who was to wield power in the country in the future had now been raised.

To support Wilmot really meant to help undermine the whole system of slavery in the United States. It is quite understandable why the Wilmot Proviso caused panic in the South, and was fairly widely supported by people in the North. As a result, the differences between the plantation aristocracy of the South and their natural antagonists on the farms and in the towns of the North assumed an extremely sharp character.

The struggle over Congressman Wilmot's proposal set off a truly mass national movement against slavery, the first that Whitman witnessed during his lifetime. The struggle within the Democratic Party between the "Barnburners" and the "Old Hunkers" grew particularly fierce. A chain reaction began which finally led to the Democratic Party's defeat in the elections of 1860, after many years of virtual monopoly in United States politics. Abraham Lincoln became the new president of the country, representing the new Republican Party. The Civil War and the rout of the slave owners were already close.

But let us return to the late forties; in the struggle ensuing from the Wilmot Proviso, the editor of the Brooklyn *Eagle* sided with the progressive people of his country. In the issue of February 3, 1847, Whitman proudly observed that the Brooklyn *Eagle* "was the very first Democratic paper which alluded to this subject (of abolition of slavery in the new territories.— *M. M.*) in a decisive manner...".[1]

Walt Whitman, the composer of rather sickly verses, of lively but insignificant stories, took this most important, militant civic

[1] Ibid., p. 197.

idea to heart. One might say that he had found himself. Whitman had never been so passionately dedicated to any cause. Not much earlier he had been almost indifferent towards the problem of slavery, but now its denunciation became his most important theme.

In December 1846, the principal newspaper of the Brooklyn Democrats featured an article of genuine historical significance, whose content went as follows: "If there are any States to be formed out of territory lately annexed, or to be annexed, by any means to the United States, let the Democratic members of Congress, (and Whigs too, if they like) plant themselves quietly, without bluster, but fixedly and without compromise, on the requirement that *Slavery be prohibited in them forever.* We wish we could have a universal straightforward setting down of feet on this thing, in the Democratic Party. *We must.*"[1]

One might get the impression from some statements in this article that its author hoped that the whole Democratic Party would support Wilmot, but he was not as naive as that. Only a dreamer with his head in the clouds could suppose that the southern politicians would vote for the Wilmot Proviso. The editor probably only wished to inspire "Barnburners" with confidence in their strength.

Month by month, Whitman grew more stubborn in the defense of this revolutionary step in the struggle against the slave owners. When the Democratic Party suffered a defeat in the next election the editor of the Brooklyn *Eagle* wrote that this election was "a terrific warning of the folly of all half-way policy in such matters...".[2]

I must specify that at this time Whitman was still not demanding the complete abolition of the very institution of slavery. His official aim was to defend the Wilmot Proviso. Nonetheless, through the editor's discussions as to whether the new states were to be "slave" or "free", his hatred for the system of slavery in general was more and more clearly manifested. Slavery, wrote Whitman in the spring of 1847, basing his judgement on the views of "all the old fathers of our freedom", is "inconsistent with the other institutions of the land".[3]

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[1] W. Whitman, *The Gathering of the Forces*, p. 194.
[2] Ibid., p. 222.
[3] Ibid., p. 201.

Even now the Brooklyn *Eagle* sometimes condemned the fanaticism of the people Whitman called "ultra-abolitionists". The paper still indulged in attacks on the Mexicans. But the lengths to which Whitman went in his support of abolitionism can be seen from his article "American Workingmen, *Versus* Slavery" which appeared in the early autumn of 1847.

Whitman wrote: "The question whether or no there shall be slavery in the new territories ... is a question between *the grand body of white workingmen, the millions of mechanics, farmers, and operatives of our country,* with their interests, on the one side — and the interests of the few thousand rich, 'polished', and aristocratic owners of slaves at the South, on the other side." [1] He continued: "The influence of the slavery institution is to bring the dignity of labor down to the level of slavery, which, God knows! is low enough. And this it is which must induce *the workingmen of the North, East and West, to come up, to a man, in defense of their rights, their honor, and that heritage of getting bread by the sweat of the brow, which we must leave to our children.*" [2]

It is not difficult to see that Whitman's democratic convictions and the logical development of his love for freedom led him to condemn the order which allowed not only literal slavery, but also other forms of the enslavement of man.

Whitman deliberately and firmly took his stand on the side of the workingmen and the farmers. Their interests demanded the abolition of slavery, and the main burden of struggle was laid on the shoulders of these people. Whitman called on "...the carpenter, in his rolled up sleeves, the mason with his trowel, the stonecutter with his brawny chest, the blacksmith with his sooty face, the brown fisted shipbuilder, whose clinking strokes rattle so merrily in our dock yards..." [3] to join in the fight against slave owners. Let "every mechanic" together with "the workers of the land" say clearly that they wish to exist "free and independent" not only in name and not be "put down to an equality with slaves".[4] Some fifteen years before the Civil War, Walt Whitman predicted that the day was drawing near when "thousands of noble hearts at the

[1] Ibid., p. 208.
[2] Ibid., pp. 209-10.
[3] Ibid., p. 210.
[4] Ibid., p. 211.

North — the entire East — the uprousing giant of the free West" would "sweep over them (the slave owners.— *M. M.*) and their doctrines as the advancing ocean tide obliterates the channel of some little brook that erewhile ran down the sands of its shore. Already the roar of the waters is heard; and if a few short-sighted ones seek to withstand it, the surge, terrible in its fury, will sweep them too in the ruin".[1]

The revolutionary meaning of the article "American Workingmen, *Versus* Slavery" is indisputable. But something further must be said about it. This outstanding work of American revolutionary journalism, like several other articles by Whitman written at the end of the forties, contains lively and powerful images, sonorous melodies, audible rhythms, a battle call expressed by means of insistent repetition of words; and this, of course, is characteristic of many poems by Walt Whitman. I have in mind those poetic works which he began to jot down in his notebooks at precisely this time, beginning in 1847.

The Little Notebook

In the earliest of Whitman's extant notebooks the owner's address is given as the editorial offices of the Brooklyn *Eagle*, and it is fairly certain that he began making entries in the little notebook while still working for Van Anden. A few pages in the book are given to records of expenses and notes of a similar nature, but most of the space is devoted to aphorisms and strange-looking lines of unequal length, which somehow resemble lines of poetry. These were not outlines for editorials, and one feels that such notes of Whitman's are something very intimate.

The journalist who daily discussed current political problems on the pages of his newspaper, was tormented by a longing to understand, visualize and interpret the world. He was trying to write poetry which was peculiar both in content and form. Yet the very first note in Whitman's little book reads: "Be simple and clear.— Be not occult."[2] This demand he followed both as a thinker and as a poet. The striving towards the real and the genuine can be felt in everything he

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[1] W. Whitman, *The Gathering of the Forces*, pp. 213-14.
[2] *The Uncollected Poetry and Prose of Walt Whitman*, Vol. II, p. 63.

wrote. In the little notebook we also discern a powerful love of freedom. It breathes a most uncompromising democratic faith.

Let me start with the aphorisms. "I never yet knew how it felt to think I stood in the presence of my superior." It is possible that Whitman had in mind, above all else, God. Further on we read: "If the presence of God were made visible immediately before me, I could not abase myself."[1] Still less would the owner of this notebook agree to abase himself before any human being at all. "Liberty is not the fruition but the dawn of the morning of a nation."[2] In another place we find him saying: "He has the divine grammar of all tongues, and says indifferently and alike, How are you friend? to the President in the midst of his cabinet, and Good day my brother, to Sambo, among the hoes of the sugar field, and both understand him and know that his speech is right."[3] On this occasion "he" is both a philosopher and a poet at one time. In re-worked form these lines became part of *Leaves of Grass.*

Throughout the notebook there gradually arises the image of a man incarnating Whitman's ideal: a democrat, opposed to "gentlemen" of aristocratic origin, a man independent and good-natured, a man who demands equality for everybody, who prefers to be poor rather than rich. "The ignorant man," we read in one remark, "is demented with the madness of owning things.... But the wisest soul knows that no object can really be owned by one man or woman any more than another."[4]

Taken together, the aphorisms of the notebook tell us something about Whitman's understanding of the social life of the country. By 1847 it grew subtler, as his democratic bent became more militant and his thirst to understand life in its fullness more imperative. Whitman was like a coiled spring, challenging all who thought, felt and acted differently from him or, one should rather say, from the character depicted by Walt Whitman. The owner of the notebook not only advocated the equality of the President and the average American, but also put the President and a Negro slave on the same level.

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[1] Ibid., p 64.
[2] Ibid.
[3] Ibid., p. 65.
[4] Ibid., p. 67.

Moreover, Whitman called Sambo, laboring on the plantation, "brother", while the President was only a "friend".

Besides the aphorisms, and echoing them, there appeared in the little notebook lines like this:

I am the poet of slaves, and of the masters of slaves
I am the poet of the body
And I am

This line remained unfinished, but later Whitman repeated: "I am the poet of the body." And, at last completing his thought, "And I am the poet of the soul." [1]

Such, apparently, were the first lines of the very first verses of the new type which Walt Whitman committed to paper. It is still too early even to speak of "verses"; it is as though the first lumps of formless ore had been cast to the surface by the shovel. But it was from this ore that the poetic metal was to be smelted. In the poem "Song of Myself", published for the first time at least seven years later, we find, for example, the following lines:

I am the poet of the Body and I am the poet of the Soul,
The pleasures of heaven are with me
and the pains of hell are with me,
But first I graft and increase upon myself,
the latter I translate into a new tongue.

In reading the poet's early notebook, one seems to see the rudimentary beginnings of *Leaves of Grass*. This is the first glimmer of the dawn of Whitman's poetry. On the eve of the fifties he deliberately renounced the poetic canons which he had earlier followed faithfully. Traditional rhythms and rhymes began to shackle Whitman. He wanted to say something which could not be contained within the usual poetic conventions.

The poet understood perfectly well that at first sight the verses, which were not only "without rhyme, but wholly regardless of the customary verbal melody & regularity..." [2]

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[1] *The Uncollected Poetry and Prose...*, Vol. II, p. 69.

[2] *Walt Whitman's Workshop*, Ed. by C. J. Furnes, N. I., Russel and Russel, 1964, p. 150.

would strike the reader with "incredulous amazement". He says this in the introduction to the London edition of *Leaves of Grass* (it was not to be published in Whitman's lifetime). Here, however, it must be observed that even the very first lines of verse that we find in Whitman's notebook had certain elements which gave the feeling of rhyme and of rhythm.

"I am the poet of the body, and I am the poet of the soul." "I am the poet of slaves, and of the masters of slaves." Words are repeated and word arrangements are repeated. These repetitions make us feel something similar to what we experience when we come across an internal rhyme in traditional poetry, and a complicated rhythmic pattern is also formed. Let us recall the lines in "Song of Myself" where Whitman speaks of his origins:

My tongue, every atom of my blood, form'd
from this soil, this air,
Born here of parents born here from parents
the same, and their parents the same...

In these lines, too, we find repetitions and sense a distinct rhythm. Repetitions and parallel grammatical constructions are also typical of the lines mentioned above: "The pleasures of heaven are with me and the pains of hell are with me", and so on....

Whitman himself wrote that *Leaves of Grass* had its very own "rhythmic style" [1] and he used to express delight at the writers who created the most complex harmonies. As a poet he did not reject the use of rhythm, but actually sought to emphasize it. This is evident in one of Whitman's greatest poems, "Song of Myself", which we quoted above.

In the early editions of *Leaves of Grass* (up to the 1881 edition), the opening lines of "Song of Myself" read like this:

I celebrate myself,
And what I assume you shall assume,
For every atom belonging to me as good belongs to you.

Later Whitman felt that the first line was incomplete rhythmically, and somehow hung in the air, so he added

[1] Ibid., p. 35.

several words to it, which gave the line a rhythmical balance and harmony. It now reads:

I celebrate myself, and sing myself....

Now read aloud the second and third lines of "Song of Myself". Their rhythmical quality is obvious. Whitman continued to polish his published poems throughout his life and in new editions of *Leaves of Grass* poems already known to the reader would glow with new colors. Their rhythm, in particular, grew ever more vivid and exact.

Of course, it is still early for the reader to judge the wealth of Whitman's "rhythmic style". He has only become acquainted with a few lines from *Leaves of Grass* and the poet's notebook. Nevertheless it is worthwhile here to make some general remarks about this "rhythmic style" of Whitman's. Although the poet used metrical forms more often than is usually thought, strict meters in their, so to say, "pure" form are comparatively rare in his work. In *Leaves of Grass* there beats a multi-hued, shifting, varying rhythm (and it presents no small obstacle in the translation of Whitman's poems). Correspondingly, in the poet's work the most complicated melodies arise.

The musical pattern of Whitman's verse is achieved by the division of the lines into "rhythmical units", which, as a rule, are quite large. These "rhythmical units" are organized around several stressed syllables, with the primary stresses forming the rhythmic basis; they are subordinated to a structural pattern which, though not always obvious, is nonetheless undoubtedly there. And, as we have seen, another distinctive feature of Whitman's verse is the rhyme-like repetition of words. Almost half the lines in *Leaves of Grass* start with a repetition, and similar repetitions occur again and again at the end and in the middle of lines.

But even the poet's very earliest notebook allows us to see something else. In Whitman's ponderings on philosophy and politics there was an obvious striving to express his thoughts in images (remember the philosopher's greeting to Sambo). In Whitman's first poetic jottings of a new type there is even more figurative imagery, even more of the feeling aroused by concrete objects. Whitman wrote of himself, "I am the poet of Equality...".[1] Further on we find the following idea: just as the

[1] *The Uncollected Poetry and Prose of Walt Whitman*, Vol. II, p. 70.

air belongs to everyone, ("it is for the heroes and sages ... it is for the workingmen and farmers ... it is for the wicked just the same as the righteous"),[1] so equality is the natural right of all.

In Whitman's poetry, even the very earliest, we get to know people, and above all, we see before us that well-defined, concrete person who has declared himself the poet of equality. Walt Whitman is both the author and the hero of the verses in the small notebook. From page to page his character unfolds; he is a man hungry for life. He wants to find out more about the world, to feel more; reality in all its infinite variety is dear to him. Whitman's lines in the notebook are filled with faith and love of life:

> *I am the poet of reality*
> *I say the earth is not an echo,*
> *Nor man an apparition;*
> *But that all the things seen are real....*[2]

The struggle between the defenders of freedom and those who bind people in shackles is real; the physical world is real; the human body is real; man's soul is real. Some of the ideas noted down by the poet in this little book show that certain pantheistic conceptions were close to his way of thinking. For instance: "The soul or spirit transmits itself into all matter — into rocks, and can live the life of a rock — into the sea, and can feel itself the sea...."[3] These pantheistic motifs helped Whitman to express in images his feeling that the world was a totality, that the material and the spiritual aspects of life formed a unity. At the same time the "new" poet was instinctively driven towards materialism. At the very end of the forties he wrote on the margin of an article in an English magazine that materialism was the basis of poetry, meaning by this, above all, the need for poetry to be closely linked to life.

There is yet another side to the man who comes to view in the small notebook.... It contains the outline of a poem in which Whitman expressed his idea of the role of the poet in the following unexpectedly bold and lively images:

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[1] Ibid., p. 75.
[2] Ibid., p. 69.
[3] Ibid., p. 64.

To any one dying, thither I speed and twist the knob of the door,
Turn the bed-clothes toward the foot of the bed,
Let the physician and the priest go home.

I seize the descending man and raise him with resistless will,
O despairer, here is my neck,
By God, you shall not go down! hang your whole weight upon me.

I quote the lines in the form in which they later appeared in *Song of Myself.*

Thus, Whitman not only grasped the world mentally, constantly inhaling everything around him, including that which is hidden from the human gaze. He did not only proclaim equality. As a poet, he apprehended life *actively*; he was vigorous, full of strength, full of determination to make people happier.

In the soul of this American, who by the end of the forties had come to the conclusion that there was a real possibility of putting an end to slavery, a fiery desire was growing to free man from all his torments.

It was then that the poet was born in him.

The Editor is Dismissed Again

The Brooklyn *Eagle* was still issued every day, but the editor no longer faced the task of merely filling the usual spaces free of advertising with interesting material. He was constantly obliged to discharge new salvoes in the direction of the enemy camp, for there is no doubt that the slave owners and their allies were already Whitman's sworn enemies.

At the Democratic Party convention Wilmot received no support. The conservatives at the head of the party even improved their position. The House of Representatives in Washington at first approved the Proviso, but General Cass, the leader of the Democratic Party, managed to force through an abrogation of the decision. In late 1847, Cass expounded his views in a lengthy document. It was assumed that all the Democratic Party papers would publish it, even if it was not to the liking of some of the editors.

But here Walt Whitman displayed a firmness of purpose which Van Anden had not expected of him. He refused to print Cass's declaration, and then published an article of his

own (in the issue dated January 3, 1848) in which he demolished the General's position. This was an affront the "Old Hunkers" could not tolerate.

Wishing to avoid a public scandal, Van Anden did not immediately announce that Whitman had been dismissed from the paper. Only after other organs of the press (for instance, the New York *Globe*) began to hint that not all was well in the editorial office of the Brooklyn *Eagle*, did Van Anden announce that the publisher "in the course of his business arrangements, has found it necessary to dispense with one of its editors".[1]

Van Anden's announcement appeared in the Brooklyn *Eagle* in late January 1848, but on the 5th of that month the paper had already printed extracts from Cass's document, which suggests that by then Whitman was no longer the editor.

The argument between the Brooklyn *Eagle* and other newspapers about Whitman's dismissal did not end there. Van Anden was forced to return to this ticklish question more than once. It is interesting that, like the owners of the *Aurora*, the publisher of the Brooklyn *Eagle* tried to justify his action by alleging that the dismissed editor was an idler.

Van Anden had yet another sharp exchange with the local press in the summer of 1848 when an article appeared in the Brooklyn *Advertiser* which explained the "secret" reasons for Whitman's break with the *Eagle*. According to the paper, the first of these reasons was Whitman's unwillingness to support the position of the conservatives. The second was that the former editor of the Brooklyn *Eagle* reacted quite unambiguously to a personal insult he had suffered from a certain well-known politician. Quite simply, the editor had kicked him down the stairs.

The owner of the *Eagle* answered the article in the style of Dickens's "New York Sewer", declaring that all its allegations were false. The fact was that Mr. W. was lazy, sluggish and rude.

An important piece of news was printed in the *New York Tribune* in connection with Whitman's break with the Brooklyn *Eagle*. After informing its readers that the conservatives had assumed a position of power in the press organ of the Brooklyn Democrats, it indicated that the Brooklyn Barnburners were

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[1] W. Whitman, *The Gathering of the Forces*, p. XXXIV.

intending to found their own paper, and even specified that Walt Whitman, formerly of the *Eagle*, would head it. It is quite possible that the idea of founding a paper which could condemn slavery uncompromisingly originated with the editor of the *Eagle* long before he was driven from this paper. Whitman's dream, however, was not to be realized soon.

Many months passed before the new paper became a reality, but this remark in the *Tribune* helps to explain Whitman's further conduct. In dealing with his move to New Orleans at the beginning of 1848, the poet's biographers are hard pressed to explain why Whitman stayed such a short time in this southern town and returned so quickly to Brooklyn. From the beginning of January to the end of September, 1848, when the first issue of the weekly *Brooklyn Freeman* came out under his editorship, it is unlikely that he abandoned his desire to set up a frankly anti-slavery, radical paper, and as soon as he felt that there was hope for founding such a publication in Brooklyn, he hurried back.

"A Man's Body at Auction"

The little we know about the circumstances that drew the poet to New Orleans, we owe to his own reminiscences, though Whitman spoke of this only very sparingly, without revealing the deeper motives behind his trip. Nonetheless, the picture is fairly clear.

To start publication of a new, and moreover, radical newspaper in a comparatively big town like Brooklyn was no easy matter. It required far greater resources than to start a small weekly in some Long Island village. Furthermore, the Brooklyn Barnburners were in no rush to part with their cash. They still had no organization of their own, and there were comparatively few well-to-do people amongst them.

Whitman the journalist was left without work, and his sharp attacks on slavery could be no recommendation to the owners of the Democratic Party newspapers in either New York or Brooklyn. His convictions would not allow the poet to work on the Whig papers, and so the pressing need to earn something forced him to grasp at the first job which was offered.

At the beginning of February Whitman happened to be in a theater on Broadway; during an intermission he fell to talking with a certain gentleman. It turned out that the latter was

planning to publish a new newspaper in New Orleans. Emphasizing the fortuitous nature of the invitation to go South, Whitman claimed later that he agreed to work on the daily New Orleans *Crescent* after only fifteen minutes of conversation and a drink. We must assume that the New Orleans publisher did not take the trouble to find out the political convictions of the journalist he met in the theatre, since the deal turned out—at least from the point of view of the *Crescent*'s owners—to be none too profitable.

The poet's journey to New Orleans was described in considerable detail in the letters sent home by his younger brother, Thomas Jefferson Whitman (or simply Jeff), who was still a youngster. In those times it was a long, difficult journey, first by train, then by stage-coach and finally by steamer along the Ohio and the Mississippi.

New Orleans impressed Whitman with its exotic beauty, numerous theatres, noisy market-places and streets nearly always filled with merry crowds. At first Whitman wrote quite prolifically, but "the Northerner", of course, could not be trusted with articles on political subjects. The newcomer specialized in accounts of everyday impressions and short descriptions of street scenes. Within a few weeks, however, Whitman's output dropped off sharply even in this genre, and his work reached print less and less often. The attitude of the owners of the New Orleans newspaper toward their employee from far-away New York grew noticeably cooler. If the publisher had been rather hasty in inviting Whitman to work on the *Crescent*, neither had the former editor of the Brooklyn *Eagle* given due consideration to his decision to start work for the New Orleans paper. He did not take into account that the *Crescent* was to be published in an important slave center.

Whitman left New Orleans at the end of May, only three months after his arrival. In his old age he attributed the break with the owners of the *Crescent* to quarrels over money matters.

But Whitman could not have remained indifferent to what he saw while living in a town where slave trade flourished. There were a number of journalists in the North who were not in the least put out by the existence of slavery in the United States. A sporting and humorous journal published in New York during the forties was very popular among the southern planters. But the struggle against slavery had been an important aspect of Whitman's life for at least a year by then,

and his stay in New Orleans could only deepen the young writer's hostility to the customs of a slave-owning society.

In Whitman's poem "I Sing the Body Electric", written in the early fifties, we find the following lines:

> *A man's body at auction,*
> *(For before the war I often go to the slave-mart and*
> *watch the sale,)....*

The poet had the opportunity to visit the slave market "often" only during his stay in New Orleans, since there were no "slave-marts" in New York or Brooklyn. Buying and selling people cannot be permitted — this is the idea of the poem. Man is "a wonder"; no money in the world is worth the true price of a man. The author of "I Sing the Body Electric" declares with wrathful irony that the "auctioneer, the sloven does not half know his business". Can he show the real magnificence of the man he is trying to sell? The poet is, as it were, transformed into a slave trader (remember the words in the small notebook — "I am the poet of slaves, and of masters of slaves"), in order to bring down the hammer of his sarcasm on the very concept of slavery. Whitman exclaims,

> *Gentlemen look on this wonder,*
> *Whatever the bids of the bidders they cannot be high*
> *enough for it,*
> *For it the globe lay preparing quintillions of years*
> *without one animal or plant,*
> *For it the revolving cycles truly and steadily roll'd.*

No matter what color his skin may be, Man is the crown of creation, and cannot be traded as though he were an object. A slave has in his head an "all-baffling brain". He is a man in all the splendor of his humanity. He has "exquisite senses, life-lit eyes, pluck, volition". In a Negro's veins there flows "the same old blood! the same red-running blood!", in his heart there are "all passions, desires, reachings, aspirations". It is unlikely that these lines, with their restrained fury, the product of the worship of human beings, were written while Whitman was actually in New Orleans, but there can be no doubt that they were written not many years after.

Although there had once been slave owners among the Whitmans, the poet's negative attitude to slavery was now shared by the other members of his family. Jeff instinctively

despised the planters, and a curious proof of this has been preserved in one of the youth's letters to Brooklyn. In the offices of the *Crescent* Jeff fulfilled the none too onerous duties of an errand-boy and so he had sufficient free time to keep his relatives up to date on his own life and his brother's. He informed his relatives that he was happy in his position, and in general life in the South suited him. But in passing he described with biting sarcasm the base moral code of the southern slave owners. In March 1848 he wrote: "On Sunday morning, we (i.e., Jeff and Walt.— *M. M.*) took a walk down to the old French church and an old looking thing it is too. Every one would go up and dip their fingers in the holy water and then go home and *whip* their *slaves.*" [1]

But we have not said anything as yet about the love drama surrounding Whitman during these spring days.... Again I am forced to repeat that no one has been able to produce any convincing evidence about the poet's New Orleans romance, which supposedly determined his whole future.

Of course, Whitman did not remain indifferent to the beauty of the female inhabitants of New Orleans, as was only to be expected from a young man full of unspent life force, and a poet at that. But he was extremely modest and behaved quite decorously. In his letters Jeff gave a high estimate of his elder brother's moral qualities; while informing his parents that the local inhabitants were not distinguished for their virtues, that they drank a great deal and in general led rather loose lives, Jeff found it necessary to add: "You know that Walter is averse to such habits...." [2]

Still, we know from two of his articles that the poet who was averse to "loose habits" was far from a puritan in his attitude to the beauty of the human body. In these articles, which were published in the *Crescent*, Whitman gave a sharp rebuff to papers which had condemned a troupe of actors calling themselves "model artists". Performing half-naked, as the press noted with horror, these "model artists" appeared on stage as living "sculptures". Whitman was annoyed at the prudish idea that the naked body was something sinful. He called such an attitude to "divine beauty" a product of "sickly prudishness".

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[1] W. Whitman, *The Correspondence*, Vol. I, p. 30.
[2] Ibid., p. 31.

As early as April Jeff wrote to his relatives that his brother wanted to go back North as soon as he could get together enough money. Whitman had been following the Brooklyn and New York press very closely the whole time, and was up to date on the political struggle between the "Old Hunkers" and the Barnburners. This strengthened his desire to return home.

Walt and Jeff made the long journey from New Orleans to St. Louis on the steamboat *Pride of the West* and then transferred to another boat which took them as far as the small town of La Salle. Then the travellers lugged their baggage onto a special small vessel which made trips along the canal to Chicago. Once there, the Whitmans found a place on a lake steamer. They passed the towns of Milwaukee, Cleveland, Buffalo.... Then Niagara Falls.

Four months after leaving New York, the poet, who had always longed to see his vast homeland, had visited Louisiana and several other states in the South, Missouri, Illinois, Michigan, Ohio and the northern part of his home state of New York.

In his poetry Whitman speaks of "walking in Alabama", of Louisianian, Georgian being near to him, of being "a Southerner soon as a Northerner". He calls Niagara Falls "a veil" that is falling "over my countenance". The poet by no means saw with his own eyes all that he wrote about but the trip to New Orleans gave him the chance to visit many different parts of the country. The magnificent Mississippi, the gentle charm of the Allegheny Mountains, the turbid waters of the Ohio, the boundless prairies—all this he took in with a poet's lively and keen glance.

If the South with its slavery remained something alien and even inimical for Whitman, despite the spicy enchantment of New Orleans, then the western regions of the country appeared to him decidedly attractive. In the West, the poet felt, there lived bold and strong people who were conquering the virgin lands and were not yet spoilt by the civilization of the dollar.

The *Brooklyn Freeman*

While the poet was living in New Orleans and travelling (he got back to his parents' home in the summer of 1848), some most important political developments were taking place in the

country. A Democratic Party convention was held at the end of May in Baltimore to nominate candidates for the forthcoming presidential elections and define the Democrats' position on important issues of the day. The conflict between the conservatives and the Barnburners had by then become so exacerbated that two delegations were sent to the convention from New York, one from each group. On the most controversial problem — the future of slavery in the new states — the convention reached no formal decision, but the man chosen as the presidential candidate was General Cass, the very same opponent of the Wilmot Proviso whom Whitman had denounced many times. The supporters of slavery were clearly in the majority. Even the Whigs in their convention which took place before Whitman returned to Brooklyn, did not dare to come out openly against slavery.

The young journalist was outraged. He immediately became involved in political strife and no longer simply gave his support to the Barnburners; like thousands of other opponents of slavery, Whitman realized in the summer of 1848 that he could no longer ally himself with the Democrats.

It was not easy for the poet, who had inherited his devotion to the Democratic Party from his father, to break completely with Jackson's party, yet Walter Whitman Jr. became one of the growing number of Americans demanding the establishment of a new party which would take a bold stand against slavery in the new states. He became one of the most resolute opponents of Cass, and when the Brooklyn supporters of "free soil" met to choose delegates to the new party's congress the former editor of the Brooklyn *Eagle* was among the fifteen chosen. The Free Soilers nominated Van Buren as their presidential candidate. He, too, had decided to break with the Democrats.

Once again the time had come for Whitman to devote his efforts to political journalism. As a member of the Brooklyn committees of the Free Soilers he took it upon himself to establish a press organ for the new party in the city. The first issue of the weekly *Brooklyn Freeman* appeared on the 9th of September, 1848.

Until recently this issue was considered lost. When a copy of the first issue of the *Brooklyn Freeman* was found and reproduced in a small edition it lent additional touches to the picture of Whitman as the editor of a rebellious Free Soiler

paper. From a manuscript housed in the Library of Congress, we learn that the project for founding a new paper was drawn up as early as the 11th of July, but it was only two months later that the first copy of the *Brooklyn Freeman* was put on the editor's desk in a Brooklyn house ("in Orange Street, third basement room from Fulton").

The leading article of this issue of the *Brooklyn Freeman* began with the following words: "Hardly any one who takes the trouble to look two minutes at our paper will need being told, at any length, what objects we have in view." This was quite true. Addressing his readers as "Free Soilers! Radicals! Liberty men" Whitman wrote that his task was to "wake up" Brooklyn to radical sentiments. The *Brooklyn Freeman*'s militancy was demonstrated by the very style of its leading articles, which were vigorous, assertive and firm. Whitman told the paper's correspondents that "all communications must be *short*, and directly to the point, without circumlocution, or any attempt to beat round the bush".[1]

The paper's slogan was opposition to any attempts to enlarge the territory where slavery existed. Our first object, wrote the editor, is to "oppose, under all circumstances, the addition to the Union, in future, of a single inch of *slave land*, whether in the form of state or territory". The *Brooklyn Freeman's* close ties with the Free Soilers were evidenced in a call to vote for Martin Van Buren and Charles F. Adams for president and vice-president respectively.

The rise of the Free Soilers was undoubtedly one of the most important aspects of American social reality in the late forties of the last century. It was a party incorporating abolitionists from the so-called Liberty Party (whose best-known leader was the poet John G. Whittier), the Barnburners and some supporters of Free Soil among the Whigs. Soon the Free Soilers gained the support of the most progressive elements of the country, farmers and artisans for the most part. Several workers' organisations also joined the Free Soil movement.

Naturally, the more class-conscious American proletarians went considerably further than the program of the Free Soilers. One of the resolutions adopted by a meeting of Boston trade-unionists in honor of the European revolutions of 1848

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[1] *Brooklyn Freeman*, Sept. 9, 1848.

contained a direct statement that the workers were oppressed not only by the despotic attitude of the slave owners in the South, but also by the ascendancy of the money oligarchy in the North. But only a small number of people understood that the interests of all large property-owners, both in the South and in the North, were opposed to the interests of the working masses. Marxist thought began to reach the United States several years later.

The supporters of Free Soil fought, as a rule, only against the southern planters and those northerners who supported them either directly or indirectly. In their struggle for democratic agrarian reforms, many Free Soilers, including Whitman, naively hoped to attain through them general well-being and happiness. In actual fact, these reforms could only lead, and did lead, to a strengthening of the bourgeois order in the agricultural system of the United States. And yet there can be no doubt as to the fundamentally progressive character of the Free Soil movement, which demanded genuinely revolutionary changes in the life of American society.

According to W. Z. Foster's book, *The Negro People in American History*, the Free Soil Party convention in Buffalo, in which Whitman took part, declared defiantly that Congress had "no more power to make a slave than to make a king; no more power to institute or establish Slavery than to institute or establish monarchy". Foster remarked that although the party was nominally "Free Soil" (i.e., it objected only to the encroachment of the system of slavery on the new lands), "the party was basically anti-slavery". Its motto was "Free Soil, Free Speech, Free Labor, Free Men".[1]

Walt Whitman was not prepared to restrict himself to the official platform of the Free Soilers, i.e., to the demand that slavery not be allowed to expand in the United States. Practically every article in the first issue of the *Brooklyn Freeman* (almost all of them were written by Whitman himself) protested against the very institution of slavery. Expounding the views of Jefferson and quoting what Whitman ironically called an example of his "horrible outburst of incendiarism", the editor emphasized the great enlightener's hostility to slavery in general, and made no secret about his own position.

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[1] W. Z. Foster, *The Negro People in American History*, 1970, p. 149.

In conclusion, Whitman stated quite bluntly that Americans would be much better off if an end had been put to slavery in Jefferson's time.

Whitman's views on slavery are expressed with particular clarity in his article "Our Enmity to the South", which appeared in the first number of the *Brooklyn Freeman.* With remarkable clarity of perception and class feeling, Whitman refused to regard the South as a united whole. There were "slave owners, traders and breeders" in the South, but there were also "hundreds of thousands of white farming men, mechanics, artificers, professional persons, clerks, etc., who do *not* own slaves". The Civil War was still thirteen years away, but Whitman was already declaring, openly and with the passion of a genuine tribune of the people, his "enmity toward an aristocratical minority ... who hold bondsmen". In other words, his enmity was only toward "some fifteenth, or at the utmost some tenth, of the white inhabitants of the South". Never mind, concludes the author of the article sarcastically, "in pursuance of a great principle, it is impossible to avoid being somebody's enemy — which must console us".[1]

Calculation was alien to Whitman, and he did not count on receiving high political positions as a result of the Free Soilers' victory. The poet was afire with a genuine, pure flame of love for the people, a love free from self-interest. But another trial was in store for Whitman. Fate was not gentle with him. In the first number of the *Brooklyn Freeman* the editor promised that the paper would initially come out on Saturdays, and after a few weeks would be issued daily. He was unable to keep his word, for the very day after he made the promise, the area where the editorial offices and print-shop stood was swept by fire. The equipment, the paper, and probably the copy that had been prepared for the press — all was lost.

The extent of the material damage caused by the fire can be judged from the fact that two whole months passed before Whitman could resume publication of the *Brooklyn Freeman* even as a weekly. The elections, in which Free Soil candidates were taking part, were almost upon them.

Only in the spring of 1849 was the editor able to add to the title of his paper the word "daily".

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[1] *Brooklyn Freeman*, Sept. 9, 1848.

Whitman worked on this paper only for one year, and then left. Several of his biographers are inclined to ascribe this, once again, to the poet's difficult character or his fundamental laziness. In actual fact his departure from the *Brooklyn Freeman* was not at all a matter of contentiousness or laziness, but one involving his principled stand as a revolutionary democrat.

This is how it happened. The 1848 elections brought the Free Soilers only a very limited success, and there was no hope of the party's gaining power, at least in the near future. As a result, several well-known Democrats who had joined the Free Soilers began to wonder whether they had not made a mistake from the "practical" point of view. Throughout the summer of 1849 there were secret talks between the Free Soilers and the Democratic Party. By autumn, Whitman realized that during the next elections the Free Soilers would unite with the Democrats again.

Several prominent politicians who spoke at the convention in Buffalo approved a deal with the Democrats. But Whitman was outraged by the attitude of the Free Soilers' leaders. He would not defend any grovelling before the slave owners. He would rather leave his post as editor of the newspaper.

In the last number of the *Brooklyn Freeman* to carry Whitman's name he printed a militant letter to the readers. He thanked his friends and expressed his contempt for his enemies, against whom he would always continue to struggle.

On the eve of the Civil War Whitman wrote a brief poem called "To the States". It begins with the following lines:

To the States or any one of them, or any city of the States,
Resist much, obey little....

"Resist much..." — that was Whitman's motto now.

He Was Also Writing a Little...

Leaving the *Brooklyn Freeman* had a far greater significance for Whitman than his split with the owners of the *Aurora* or the Brooklyn *Eagle*. Although later the poet was forced more than once to drudge as a newspaper editor, after September 1849 he really ceased to be a professional journalist.

But he still had to earn a living, and after leaving the Free Soil paper he began to look for other newspaper work. There

exists a restrained and rather sad letter from the poet to a certain C. D. Stuart, the editor of one of the newly founded New York newspapers.

In the letter, Whitman, recently a prominent journalist, implores Stuart to offer him any sort of work. At the end of the letter is a postscript: "My ideas of salary are *very* moderate." [1] Obviously Whitman was well known in journalistic circles for his radical convictions, and had no hope of being offered a decent job.

The letter to Stuart was probably written in October, 1850. A year later, in another letter, this time to a coal and wood dealer called Muchmore, Whitman already appears as a "printer" requesting payment for the work he has done.

There is no detailed information available to the literary historian on how Whitman earned his daily bread during the first half of the fifties, when *Leaves of Grass* was composed. There are very few letters extant from this period and the poet's work appeared very rarely in the American press in those years. The main source of information on these most important five years of the poet's life are the reminiscences, none too rich in factual detail, of himself and people close to him. Still, it is definitely known that for some time Whitman worked as a carpenter, helping his father and brothers to build houses.

Apparently at this time, the Whitmans, including Walter Junior, built several houses at their own risk and then sold them more or less at a profit; but they accumulated no wealth. The head of the family never was a really astute businessman. Nor did any one of his sons grow prosperous. As for the former editor of the *Brooklyn Freeman*, he displayed a defiant disdain for business. Later, his brother George recalled that although Walt worked in order to live, he did not work a lot and considered money of no significance. Even when he was working for a newspaper, the free-lance journalist no longer acted with his previous zeal. Having observed that Walt worked without over-straining himself, George added that he was also writing a little.

The first, 1855 edition of *Leaves of Grass* contained less than a hundred pages of text. Though one could call this "a little", the creation of the twelve poems which, together with a long

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[1] W. Whitman, *The Correspondence*, Vol. I, p. 38.

foreword, made up this remarkable book, had required long and stubborn labor. Whatever poetic potential there may have been in Whitman at the end of the thirties and beginning of the forties, turning it to account some ten years later required not only time, but a fundamental rebuilding of his creative life.

If the very earliest signs of such a transformation were recorded in the little notebook, then the next signpost of the poet's growth, of his development into the author of *Leaves of Grass*, were the poems he wrote in 1850. The journalist, who seemed to have forgotten his youthful poetic experiments, was suddenly testing his ability to write poetry again. Even more clearly than the little notebook, these poems establish the link between Whitman's attraction to literature and the passionate fight against the slave owners' power which occupied him at the end of the forties.

The editor of the *Brooklyn Freeman* was obliged to leave his post because he did not want to help the politicians destroy the Free Soil movement. But he did not surrender and did not fall silent, did not abandon the social struggle in favor of the world of "pure poetry".

On the contrary, for Whitman the very end of the forties and the beginning of the fifties was a time marked by the bitterest clashes with the enemies of democracy, clashes in which he used the weapons not only of a publicist, but of a poet as well.

The attempts of the "Old Hunkers" heading the Democratic Party at the time to force the Free Soilers to retreat were only one aspect of the attack being mounted by the slave owners. About ten years before the Civil War, influential bourgeois circles in the northern states, bowing to pressure from the almighty southern plantation owners, agreed to a number of "compromises" which profited only the slave owners.

The planters were full of far-reaching plans. They worked frantically to establish as many states as possible where slavery would be allowed. Furthermore, they dreamed of raising the flag of the United States over Cuba and several other central American countries and to introduce slavery there. Progressive elements in the country realized that new victories for the slave owners would have been impossible but for the connivance of many northern politicians.

The *New York Herald*, which expressed the views of the large landowners, wrote in 1850 that the preservation of the wealth of New York, the largest city in the country, called for a

struggle against fanatics, philosophers and fools (i.e., as was clear from the article, the opponents of slavery). The victory of anti-slavery views, warned the paper, would cause indignation in the South, which could endanger the unity of the country.

The "compromises" of 1850 were just some of the many victories of the South in the history of the United States shortly before the Civil War. But as Marx has shown, these were not easy victories for the South. The forces hostile to the plantation owners began to act ever more vigorously, and each new advance by the slave owners led them to an eventual defeat.

There is a very interesting letter by Whitman to John Hale, the Free Soiler candidate for president in the 1852 elections. Whitman was not personally acquainted with Hale and at this time did not work regularly on any paper.

The poet wrote to Hale: "You are at Washington, and have for years moved among the great men. I have never been at Washington, and know none of the great men. But...," he continues, "I know well, (for I am practically in New York,) the real heart of this mighty city — the tens of thousands of young men, the mechanics, the writers, etc., etc." Speaking in the name of the people, Whitman goes on to point out the machinations of the politicians who are conniving with the plantation owners. "... Under and behind the bosh of the regular politicians ... New York is the most radical city in America. It would be the most anti-slavery city, if that cause hadn't been made ridiculous by the freaks of the local leaders here." [1]

With proud confidence, the poet addressed the leader of the Free Soilers as a representative of the masses. His letter rings with the conviction that the average American workingman loves freedom with all his soul. Some lines from the letter echo the poems that Whitman was working on at the time. He concluded the message to Hale with the following words: "How little you at Washington — you Senatorial and Executive dignitaries — know of us, after all. How little you realize that the souls of the people ever leap and swell to any thing like a great liberal thought or principle...." [2]

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[1] W. Whitman, *The Correspondence*, Vol. I, p. 40.
[2] Ibid.

Whitman, of course, was not the only American writer roused to wrath by the slave owners' advances. At the time that Whitman was still writing mostly about the "glory" of death, Whittier was already putting his muse at the service of abolitionism, and Henry Longfellow's poetic cycle *Poems on Slavery* appeared at the same time as *Franklin Evans*. When, in the late forties, the struggle against slavery assumed large proportions, abolitionist themes came to the fore also in the work of James Lowell. Verse was used as a weapon against the plantation owners by Bryant, Emerson and several other American poets. There is no doubt that the flourishing of poetry in the middle of last century was closely linked to a surge in the anti-slavery movement.

This was noticed by Lev Tolstoy, as indicated in the following words (used by his English translator, Aylmer Maude, in an article in which he summarized Tolstoy's ideas about the nineteenth-century literature of the United States): "A great literature arises when there is a great moral awakening. Take, for instance, the emancipation period, when the struggle for the abolition of serfdom law was going on in Russia, and the anti-slavery movement was alive in the United States. See what writers appeared: Harriet Beecher Stowe, Thoreau, Emerson, Lowell, Whittier, Longfellow, William Lloyd Garrison, Theodore Parker, and others in America...." [1]

All these writers, as well as Whitman, were not only concerned with the bitter fate of the slaves. Yet it was the spirit of struggle for the principle expressed by Whitman in the words, "I say man shall not hold property in man", which called to life many of the finest works of American literature on the eve of the Civil War.

The Biglow Papers by Lowell (remember that the first series of poems under this title was written during the war with Mexico) is a grotesque, satiric condemnation not only of the southern slave owners, but also of their northern connivers. The key to the vitality and expressiveness of this, the poet's best work, lies in the very commonness and crudeness of the language used by Lowell's heroes, and in the sarcastic tone of the author.

[1] Aylmer Maude, *Tolstoy and His Problems*, N. Y. Funk & Wagnalls, 1904, p. 192.

Lowell was to live for a great many more years and write many more books, but he will probably always be remembered as the author of *The Biglow Papers* (the second part of this collection of satirical verse was published during the Civil War; although it does not compare in freshness and vividness with the first part, it nevertheless contributes to the value of the work as a whole).

Longfellow's *Poems on Slavery* have stood for more than a century not only as a witness of how close the author of *Haiawatha* was to the progressive anti-slavery ideas of his time, but also as an aesthetic phenomenon of the first order, impressive in its dramatic character and wealth and variety of poetic motifs.

One poem in the cycle is a masterpiece of American abolitionist verse. "The Warning" is a prophecy of retribution which will fall on the country that makes its peace with slavery.

There is a poor, blind Samson in this land,
Shorn of his strength and bound in bonds of steel,
Who may, in some grim revel, raise his hand,
And shake the pillars of this Commonweal,[1]
Till the vast Temple of our liberties
A shapeless mass of wreck and rubbish lies.[1]

The cycle *Poems on Slavery* points to some of the sources of the other works that Longfellow wrote in mid-century. Was not even *Haiawatha*, published at the same time as the first edition of *Leaves of Grass*, inspired by feelings close to those which had fired Longfellow's poems about the Negroes? It was the wave of sympathy for all enslaved peoples spreading through the United States with the growing abolitionist movement that enabled the poet to create a work about the proud race being exterminated by the Americans, a poem embodying the dream of peace and friendship between peoples.

John Greenleaf Whittier was of the same stock as the New England farmers, who gave him his democratic attitudes and his implacable hatred toward slavery. All his life Whittier was faithful to farm laborers, both to those who lived in the bosom of nature, yet were unaware of the bliss of their condition, and to those whose hopes of happiness were crushed by poverty. Never was the poet disloyal to his conviction regarding the

[1] *The Poems of H. W. Longfellow*, New York, Grosset & Dunlap, 1891, p. 45.

wrongness of slavery. Together with his love for the farmers, this quality gave Whittier's poetry the glow of genuinely humane feeling.

For instance, in his "Stanzas for the Times" (1844), the poet says that "Freedom's light" grows dim but insists: "... One voice shall thunder — WE ARE FREE!".[1]

In Whittier's famous poem "The Farewell of a Virginia Slave Mother to Her Daughters, Sold into Southern Bondage" he depicts the grief of a woman deprived forever of her "stolen daughters"[2]. This work is written in the rhythms of Negro songs of grief and protest.

The first prose works protesting against slavery also appeared at a time when Whitman was still writing near-puerile verse, but the abolitionist novel started to flower only at the beginning of the fifties. It is worth noting that Harriet Beecher Stowe's *Uncle Tom's Cabin* appeared almost simultaneously with Whitman's first "real" poems. At that same time Henry Thoreau became an important defender of the ideas of abolitionism.

Whitman published four poems in 1850, and found only one of them worthy of inclusion in his first book of poems. But these short works reveal much of the ideological and emotional stimuli which helped in the creation of the remarkable *Leaves of Grass.*

In his poems of 1850 Whitman had not yet reached the turning point. He had still not really found himself, still not become a real master. And yet the four poems of the year of "compromises", poems unlike each other, reflecting different stages in the poet's development, make it clear how something new, something inherently Whitman's own, arose out of traditional poetic forms.

The experience of the editor of the Brooklyn *Eagle* and the *Brooklyn Freeman* in the late forties made it clear to him that the power of the slave owners lay in the support they received from the Northerners. In his poem "Song for Certain Congressmen" (now known as "Dough-Face Song") Whitman continued to work for the cause which had occupied his thoughts as a publicist and man of politics. The poem is satirical; speaking in the voice of the "dough-faces", Whitman

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[1] *Poems of J. G. Whittier,* N. Y., Syndicate Trading, n.d., pp. 178-79.
[2] Ibid., p. 199.

exposes with merciless mockery the pettiness and villainy of the supporters of "compromises".

Maddened by the demands of the Free Soilers, the slave owners "howl" hysterically against Free Soil and abolition, and the "dough-faces" among the northern congressmen echo the wild wailing.

Not so long before Whitman himself had called the abolitionists "fanatics", but now he puts this reproach into the mouths of the despised supporters of the Southerners.

To put down "agitation," now,
We think the most judicious;
To damn all "northern fanatics,"
Those "traitors" black and vicious;
The "reg'lar party usages"
For us, and no "new issues."[1]

This is really a pamphlet in verse. The poet lists the names of the most odious lawmakers who were trying to gratify the plantation owners; he lays bare the motives behind their actions (they are chasing after "present gain"). Whitman warns the "dough-faces" that the hour of retribution will come. The nature of "Dough-Face Song" is undisguisedly publicistic, and the poetic form is traditional. It is written in iambic meter and rhymed. For instance, the "dough-faces" exclaim:

And what if children, growing up,
In future seasons read
The thing we do? and heart and tongue
Accurse us for the deed?
The future cannot touch us;
The present gain we heed.[2]

In his next poem "Blood-Money" Whitman continues his struggle against the northern advocates of a deal with the Southerners. The poet's denunciations have become even sharper, his tone even sterner.

Whitman included concrete historical material in this poem, and this type of content bursts the usual poetic shell,

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[1] W. Whitman, *The Complete Poetry and Prose*, Vol. Two, N. Y., Pellegrini & Cudahy, 1948, p. 350.

[2] Ibid., p. 350.

demanding a new, subtler form of verse. "Blood-Money" is not so resounding a poem as "Dough-Face Song". It has neither rhymes nor the usual line structure, but it is superior to the latter poem in its wealth of images. Its two memorable characters are Jesus Christ and Judas Iscariot.

Of olden time, when it came to pass
That the beautiful god, Jesus, should finish his
work on earth,
Then went Judas, and sold the divine youth,
And took pay for his body.[1]

The reader understands that the poet is not simply retelling the gospel, but is speaking about a traitor of his own times, one who also betrayed a high ideal and noble principles for thirty pieces of silver, for "blood-money". Further on there is a description of the taunting of Christ after he has fallen into his enemies' hands through Judas's betrayal. He is "toilsome and poor", people surround him "mad with devilish spite".

The meanest spit in thy face, they smite thee
with their palms;
Bruised, bloody, and pinion'd is thy body,
More sorrowful than death is thy soul.[2]

The poetical form of "Blood-Money" shows Whitman's movement from his early verses to *Leaves of Grass*. And yet it is still by no means the work of the Whitman whom we know, for instance, from "Song of Myself".

The poet not only uses the images of Holy Writ (which occur only rarely in *Leaves of Grass*) but also to a great extent assumes the rhythmic structure of the Bible. The passionate tone of "Blood-Money", the author's tendency to use an "oratorical" style and the complexity of the rhythmic pattern of its free verse all herald the appearance of a new and original poet.

In 1850 Whitman published yet another poem inspired directly by the struggle against slavery. In the poem "Wounded in the House of Friends" (its original title was simply "The House of Friends"), the poet again uses biblical imagery and,

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[1] Ibid., p. 389.

[2] Ibid., p. 390.

to a certain extent, biblical rhythms. Just as Jesus' wounds were inflicted in the house of his friends, so the "death stab" now comes in America "from the house of friends". Of course, Whitman is speaking here of the northerners who, in the guise of "friends" of freedom, were actually helping the slave owners. The poet is no longer merely sad, no longer does he simply denounce his enemies in anger. In this poem he sounds the call to battle and clearly defines the antagonists. They are, on one side, "young North", and on the other, the states wallowing in the filth of slavery and the "dough-faced" scum who have sold out to the planters. It is these "gray-haired sneaks" that the poet hates most of all. They have to be fought resolutely. The poem "The House of Friends" ends with a direct call to genuine supporters of liberty:

Fight on, band braver than warriors,
Faithful and few as Spartans;
But fear not most the angriest, loudest, malice—
Fear most the still and forked fang
That starts from the grass at your feet.[1]

Its resoundingly militant tone ties this poem to the revolutionary speeches which the best of the abolitionist orators were then making. Whitman is here in the grip of a burning mood of civic passion; he is not addressing some tiny group of devoted lovers of poetry, but the masses, the people. He wants to express his emotions to the very end; he longs to lead people into battle. Stormy passions erupt to the surface of the poem, forcing him to break up the usual form of the verse.

The desire of the author of "Blood-Money" and "The House of Friends" to make himself a tribune of the people, to incorporate in his verses an extremely important historical content, to annihilate his foes and rally fellow-thinkers, to express in its fullness all that has accumulated in his mind and his heart, was the most important reason for his rejection of rhyme and traditionally strict rhythms. In these two poems (and especially in the second one) almost every line contains a finished thought or at least a fairly complete part of a thought. This principle later became the basis for almost all the poems in *Leaves of Grass.*

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[1] *The Uncollected Poetry and Prose of Walt Whitman,* Vol. I, p. 27.

It is evident that Whitman's hatred of slavery did not exclude a feeling of contempt for those who serve the golden calf. This alone explains why he penetrated much more deeply into the reality of American life than other poets, also true to abolitionist ideals, poets such as Whittier or Lowell, who concentrated the fire of their social criticism only on slavery.

An indication of Whitman's long-standing fury against those who live at the expense of other people's work is the fact that even while he worked for the *Aurora* the young journalist had protested against the pursuit of material gain. Later the poet had published in the Brooklyn *Eagle* an article significantly titled "Morbid Appetite for Money", in which he condemned the "mad passion for getting rich" which "engrosses all the thoughts and the time of men".[1] Whitman also mocked the industrialists of the North, who demanded that tariff rates be raised for the alleged good of the workers. What a countless number of pennies have been extracted from the pockets of workers, he said in one of his early articles, in order to enrich the owners of the big steam-run factories.

The fourth poetic work published by Whitman in 1850 was called "Resurgemus", a poem in which Whitman went far beyond the bounds of the theme of slavery. Not only does he fight against the slave owners; not only does he summon the Spartans of the abolitionist camp to battle — the poet also glorifies the revolutionary struggle for freedom throughout the world:

Suddenly out of its stale and drowsy lair,
the lair of slaves,
Like lightning it le'pt forth half startled at itself,
Its feet upon the ashes and the rags, its hand
tight to the throats of kings.[2]

"It" is revolutionary Europe. "Resurgemus" directly echoes the revolutionary eruptions in a number of European countries in the late forties and the tragedy of the suppression of these revolutions. Most probably the feelings expressed by Whitman in "Resurgemus" could not have had such trenchant forcefulness, a quality new in his poetry, had he not by then

[1] Ibid., p. 123.
[2] The poem is quoted as it appears in the final version.

become a staunch fighter for the freedom of the oppressed in his own country. Whitman's sympathy for the enslaved Negroes sprang from his democratic, humanistic outlook. In its turn, the high passion of abolitionism reinforced Whitman's general humanitarian and democratic sympathies, and gave him a greater awareness of the grandeur of the revolutionary struggle in Europe.

The conception of "Resurgemus" was broader than anything else written by the poet in 1850. The new form of Whitman's verse took shape in the course of the year. The distance between "Dough-Face Song" and "Resurgemus" is great indeed, and yet only a few months separate these poems. One might say that in a certain sense "Resurgemus" became the foundation for *Leaves of Grass*. In fact, this was the only poem of those which had appeared in print before his book was published that the poet thought worthy of inclusion.

When he printed the poem in 1850 in a newspaper, Whitman titled it "Resurgemus" ("We Shall Arise"). It was included in the 1855 edition of *Leaves of Grass* without any title. A year later the poet called it "Poem of the Dead Young Men of Europe, the 72d and 73d Years of These States". Since the third edition of *Leaves of Grass*, the poem has been known as "Europe (The 72d and 73d Years of These States)".

The revolutionary uprisings in Europe against monarchs, nobles, priests and those who wormed "the poor man's wages" were taken up by Whitman as his own, highly personal concern. It was unbearably painful for him to see the fires of revolution extinguished and dark powers take the upper hand again. The rebel's instinct told the poet that the main reason for the people's defeat was their overly gentle treatment of their sworn enemies.

But the sweetness of mercy brew'd bitter destruction,
and the frighten'd monarchs come back,
Each comes in state with his train, hangman, priest,
tax-gatherer,
Soldier, lawyer, lord, jailer, and sycophant.

The poet's closeness to the revolutionary aspirations of the peoples of Europe is attested in several of his articles which had been published earlier. On the very eve of 1848, turning

respectfully to the traditions of the French revolution of the eighteenth century, Whitman called on the people of the European monarchies to turn to the same task of radical transformation of reality that the French had undertaken more than fifty years earlier.

In "Europe" the real story of the rise and defeat of the revolutions of 1848-1849 is presented in a historically concrete manner. The poem is indeed a "Poem of the Dead Young Men of Europe" (as Whitman called it in 1856), in which the poet sings of "martyrs that hang from the gibbets, those hearts pierc'd by the gray lead". But there is more to "Europe" than simple sympathy for those who perished. The basic message of the poem is clearly expressed in its original title "Resurgemus": the tortured revolutionaries have not disappeared without trace, for "they live in other young men ... they live in brothers again ready to defy you...". The revolution will rise again.

Whitman developed motifs common to folk songs and present in several revolutionary works by Burns, Byron and Shelley to create the mighty image of "the seed for freedom", ready to send out its shoots. This "seed" is present in the grave of every warrior.

Not a grave of the murder'd for freedom but grows seed
for freedom, in its turn to bear seed,
Which the winds carry afar and re-sow, and the
rains and the snows nourish....
Liberty, let others despair of you — I never despair of you.

These wonderfully proud words were written by Whitman at a time when it seemed that reaction had everywhere taken hold. The monarchs were celebrating their victory in Europe. But had not the slave owners also gained the upper hand against the abolitionist "fanatics" and the apparently crushed movement for Free Soil? One can rest assured that the poet's audacious words, "Liberty, let others despair of you — I never despair of you", referred not only to distant Europe. Whitman believed that the enemies of freedom would also be defeated on American soil. He concluded the poem with an image, which, though suggested by the New Testament, seems to have come from everyday life.

Is the house shut? is the master away?
Nevertheless, be ready, be not weary of watching,
He will soon return, his messengers come anon.

The very everyday quality of these words makes them convincing. "Europe" is very different from the poems in praise of liberty written by other well-known American poets. It has nothing of Whittier's religious symbolism or the high rhetorical figures so typical of Emerson and even Bryant, nothing of the romantic refinement of Longfellow. For all its wealth of poetic images, Whitman's language is simple and natural. The poet quite deliberately set out to write in "a perfectly transparent, plate-glassy style, artless, with no ornaments, or attempts at ornaments, for their own sake".[1] In "Europe" Whitman adheres strictly to the principles which he had formulated.

Whitman's poem is not prose rich in images which has been arbitrarily divided into lines of varying length. It is a truly dramatic work on a profound theme, in which there emerges a varied rhythmic style capable of expressing complex ideas and countless nuances of thought and feeling. One of the things which strikes the reader is the important part that caesurae play in the rhythmic structure of "Europe".

The opening of the poem is a solemn glorification of the risen people. The three lines of the first stanza are identical in structure ("Suddenly out of its stale and drowsy lair...", etc.) and each of them falls into two parts, each part having two primary stresses. It is as though one can hear the measured tread of the revolutionary masses. The second stanza is a passionate lament; the revolutionaries have suffered a terrible blow. The stanza begins with a stormy, pauseless exclamation: "O hope and faith!" The long lines of the third stanza, which are divided into several parts by internal pauses, present an agonizing story of the mockery to which the people are subjected.

The revolutionaries are defeated. But the struggle for freedom can never die, for the "seed for freedom" is indestructible. The last stanza is full of hope and promise. The rhythm of these lines overflows with vigor and hope.

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[1] *Walt Whitman's* ***Leaves of Grass***. The first (1855) edition, Ed. by M. Cowley, Secker & Warburg, Lnd., 1960, p. XXIX.

Whitman was not the first poet to attempt a new, freer, "unfettered" rhythmic pattern. In this regard, some poems by William Blake are worthy of note. (A hundred years ago Swinburne noted a certain similarity between the poetry of Blake and that of Whitman.) What is really important is that the tendencies within Whitman's poetry of 1850 did not remain just tendencies. They ripened fully and formed the basis of all the poet's subsequent work. The author of *Leaves of Grass* proved to be the boldest and most consistent destroyer of the seemingly incontestable rules of versification.

The poems of 1850 (especially "Europe") were the prologue to great poetry. For the first time Whitman emerged as a poet with his own inimitable voice. And it is highly significant that all four poems were inspired by the desire to repulse the oppressors of the people and by the thirst for revolutionary struggle.

The poem "Resurgemus" was published in the *New York Tribune* in June 1850. *Leaves of Grass* appeared in the summer of 1855. As far as we know, Whitman did not publish a single new poem in the years between these two dates. The book was growing silently, and nothing, it might seem, foreshadowed its appearance.

Present-day critics often assert that the Whitman who wrote "Song of Myself" and other poems appeared from nowhere. Malcolm Cowley speaks of a "miracle". "There is no other word but miracle to describe what happened to Whitman at the age of thirty-six. The local politician and printer, the hack writer who had trouble selling his pieces, the editor who couldn't keep a job, quite suddenly became a world poet." [1]

Of course, the birth of poetry is always a miracle, but everything else here, in my opinion, is doubtful. Whitman the journalist was not a hack, and he "couldn't keep a job" precisely because he was a genuine democrat who defended his views firmly and ably. Whitman's articles frequently reflected the most advanced ideas of his time, and are not separated by an unbridgeable gulf from *Leaves of Grass*; on the contrary, the two are closely linked. The miracle of *Leaves of Grass* was nurtured on the same ground that produced Whitman the revolutionary democrat.

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[1] *The Complete Poetry and Prose of Walt Whitman*, Vol. One, p. 5.

PART TWO

LEAVES OF GRASS

* * *

An Open¿Hearted Man

Although we know very little about the poet's life during the five years when, line by line, he was committing to paper the verses which would make up his first collection of poetry, we do have a general idea about the circumstances accompanying the creation of *Leaves of Grass*. It is no secret that besides helping his father, Whitman hired himself out as a carpenter and became a genuine proletarian.

The poet also wrote occasional articles for newspapers. We know that Whitman loved to wander through the streets of Brooklyn and New York, observing the life of his fellow-countrymen and jotting down verses in his notebooks. He still lived in an ambience of freedom-loving ideas and used the word in the struggle against slavery. And what is equally important, Whitman's heart was always full of tender love for human beings, for his fellow-citizens, for the toilers of his homeland.

Nor was it simply a matter of poetic humanism; Whitman's love was not a love for man "in general". The author of *Leaves of Grass* possessed an amazing capacity for loving many separate, individual people, loving them "personally" and with all his heart. In his letters home Whitman appears as a conscientious son and a loving brother. True, the correspondence that has been preserved is not from the fifties, but later years, but it is not hard to infer from it how attentive and warm was his love for his mother and the rest of his family during the years he worked on *Leaves of Grass*. At this time Walter Whitman senior fell seriously ill and other misfortunes began to afflict the Whitman family.

The poet's love, however, was not confined to his family. Whitman's unassuageable desire for human warmth, his rare ability to feel comradeship and his thirst for the company of people had been noticeable even in his youth. Many of his biographers emphasize young Whitman's preference for solitude, depicting him as a person who was always lonely. To be sure, when he was writing his verses, the young man often wanted to be left alone, as befits a poet. Nevertheless Whitman was almost always glad to get together with friends, and like other people of his age, he was high-spirited, loved to sing and loved to hear them sing.

In "Specimen Days" Whitman returns to the years he spent on Long Island, recalling the long trips he made, "sometimes riding, sometimes boating, but generally afoot". During these trips he met the most diverse people.

During the Civil War the poet wrote the poem "Give Me the Splendid Silent Sun" in which he speaks joyfully of the stars, the greenery of the "field where the unmow'd grass grows", the "serene-moving animals". But there is something dearer to the author than "the splendid silent sun with all his beams full-dazzling". This "something" is people, comrades who are united by feelings so strong that he says they are "lovers". This was the poet's way of expressing something that he had begun to feel long before, during the days spent on Long Island.

Whitman was just over twenty years old when he settled in a big town for what was to be a long stay. The young journalist was not blind to the vices of his time. His contemporaries did not find him eccentric, exalted or sentimental, for he knew how to fight his enemies, how to defend himself and land telling blows. Above all, Whitman knew (and sometimes showed in his stories) how much vulgarity, filth and base rudeness there was in the nation's life. In one of his early newspaper articles he wrote that out of every twenty young men living in the big towns or visiting them, nineteen were more or less acquainted with the brothels.

Nor was Whitman unaware that many areas of New York were infested with gangs of professional thiefs and murderers. Even in his youth the poet felt that the cult of gain was asserting itself in the United States (and especially in the large trading centers of the country). Yet as the years went by Whitman's faith in the basic kindness of people grew ever

stronger, and he thirsted more and more for comradeship and selfless love.

During the very years when the first editions of *Leaves of Grass* were published, the poet's life was considerably brightened by his close friendship with many of the most indigent people in America; there were riverboat pilots who ferried the Brooklynites across to New York, omnibus drivers, craftsmen and mechanics. Whitman once said to a friend that he learned a lot from the omnibus drivers, ferrymen, fishermen, boatmen, fishwives and dock workers. They were all poets, but they did not know how to express their thoughts in communicable form.

Not only did Whitman learn a great deal about life from his simple friends and absorb their poetic experience of the world; not only did he draw on the warmth of their spirit—he was generous in sharing with his comrades the fire of his own heart.

The poet loved these simple people because in this democratic crowd, among people with no money, it was possible to find human solidarity expressed to the full, without selfishness. That is why in his notebook Whitman uses the word "sublime" to describe drivers and boatmen and men that catch fish or work in the field; that is why he did not want to "descend among professors and capitalists", but said that he would "turn the ends"[1] of his trousers around his boots, and his cuffs back from his wrists to walk with the common people.

Whitman's magnificent philosophical poem "Crossing Brooklyn Ferry" is based on life on the East River. Mark Twain half-jokingly remarked that while working as a pilot on the Mississippi he saw so many people that now any literary character seemed familiar, because he had already met its prototype on a steamboat. Whitman could have said the same about the ferries crossing the East River; they were a unique, endless, inimitable, unfailingly exciting source of poetry.

The ferry pilots themselves were the people Whitman liked best. He used to meet them every day, make conversation and swap jokes. Whitman knew the good and the bad in them, their happy and sad moods. And when he grew old he did not forget

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[1] *The Uncollected Poetry and Prose of Walt Whitman*, Vol. II, pp. 68-69.

his "old pilot friends", Johnny Cole, William White and many others. "How well I remember them all," wrote the author of "Specimen Days" with warm feeling.

Whitman's feelings for the omnibus drivers were no less tender; he saw them as "a strange, natural, quick-eyed and wondrous" race. Many times he sat beside the driver and held the reins in his own hands.

Whitman remembered for decades the names and colorful nick-names of his old friends, the coach drivers. Amongst them were Old Elephant, Young Elephant, Broadway Jack, Yellow Joe, Balky Bill. The poet spent many hours in the omnibuses at all times of day.

Sometimes he read Shakespeare to the drivers above the rattle of the wheels — perhaps a monologue from "Julius Caesar". This did not attract the attention of passers-by, for Broadway was a noisy street. Whitman did not embellish the characters of his friends, but he felt a great trust in and fondness for the general run of coach-drivers. He valued highly their "simple good-will and honor, under all circumstances".

Whitman's contemporaries recalled, often with open or concealed puzzlement, that Whitman was never ashamed of his uncultured, crude friends. The poet, a large, unhurried, calm man with a fresh, even reddish, complexion, often had lunch at the market with the people he loved, the Broadway omnibus drivers.

During the fifties the poet came to resemble a typical New York workingman in outward appearance as well. Remember that when he was editor of the *Aurora* Whitman dressed with emphatic elegance, but in the portrait printed in the first edition of *Leaves of Grass*, he is shown in simple working clothes, with an open collar. The engraver who worked on this portrait said that he had met Whitman in some restaurant and the poet was dressed in a red workingman's shirt. "I suppose the critics will laugh heartily," Whitman once wrote, "but the influence of those Broadway omnibus jaunts and drivers and declamations and escapades undoubtedly enter'd into the gestation of *Leaves of Grass*." Walt Whitman perceived much in life through the eyes of his comrades, the working people of the American town.

In his poem "Song of the Open Road" (1856) we find the following lines:

What is it I interchange so suddenly with strangers?
What with some driver as I ride on the seat
by his side?
What with some fisherman drawing his seine by the shore
as I walk by and pause?
What gives me to be free to a woman's and man's good
will? what gives them to be free to mine?

Certainly Whitman generously shared his "good-will" with people. By his very nature he was an open-hearted man. But the concrete reflections of Whitman's love for people in his poetry, full of socially significant content, were not only the product of his natural kindheartedness. It was also under the influence of the most exalted ideas of his time, among them those of utopian socialism, that he became the poet of comradeship among the working people.

Democratic Instinct

One must not forget that this former editor of big-town newspapers was far better educated than his friends and not just because newspaper work had widened his outlook. Whitman's burning passion for Shakespeare was only one proof of his poetic sensibility, his constant attraction to what is most precious in the literary heritage of humanity. His sound and firm democratic instinct also played an important role.

When the lawyer for whom he worked as a child helped him to borrow books from the library, Whitman began to read everything that came into his hands. He became acquainted with many of Walter Scott's novels and those of other great writers. Recalling what he was like at the age of 16 or 17, the poet called himself "a most omnivorous novel-reader" who "devour'd" everything he could get. Eventually he familiarized himself with the best works by American and European authors (mainly French and English and to a lesser degree with German and Russian authors).

During his years as a journalist the poet expressed in print a great many opinions on classical and contemporary literature. The well-known American scholar Emory Holloway said that during his two years of work for the Brooklyn *Eagle*, the poet reviewed over a hundred books. According to Holloway,

Whitman knew more about books than any other editor in Brooklyn and even in New York, with the possible exception of the editors of special literary publications. But still Whitman never was what you might call a bookworm. His passion for books did not overshadow his love for nature. There is something highly characteristic in the poet's remark that it is by no means unimportant *where* one reads. He absorbed Shakespeare and the Greek classics (Homer, Aeschylus, Sophocles) best not in libraries, but in the villages or on the seashore of Long Island.

Whitman loved Shakespeare, though for a long time he saw in him a propounder of feudal-aristocratic views. Only in his declining years, when he was assailed by deep doubts as to the real value of American democracy and became sharply aware that in property-owning societies human beings experience spiritual degradation, man's stature is reduced to that of a slave of things — only then did the poet begin to fully appreciate the greatness of Shakespeare's heroic characters. He spoke of the "splendid personalizations of Shakespeare, formulated on the largest, freest, most heroic, most artistic mould", and he saw in them "lessons" and "models for Democracy". After the Civil War the principle of heroism grew less and less apparent in American life.

Throughout all his years Whitman displayed a highly contradictory attitude toward the novels of Walter Scott. He greatly enjoyed reading them and thought that in some respects they were unsurpassable, but he would emphasize sharply the "toryism" of the great novelist, and speak about the "anti-democratic" nature of his work. According to Whitman, Scott did not depict any one of the fighters for freedom produced by England in its long history, an assertion, which is not quite fair — remember at least how Robin Hood is portrayed (indirectly) in *Ivanhoe*. The American poet loved the best works of such great humanists as Cervantes, Burns, Byron and Goethe.

Whitman demanded faithfulness to the principles of humanism and democracy from contemporary writers as well. He was especially fond of two nineteenth-century novelists, Dickens and George Sand. Whitman came to see Dickens as a truly democratic writer.

He spoke of Dickens with love and defended him with determination against the attacks of the American press. In an

article written in early 1842 entitled "Boz and Democracy" Whitman spoke of Dickens when formulating several of the demands facing a "democratic writer". Such a writer was one who defended progressive ideals, "the tendency of whose pages" was to "render in their deformity before us the tyranny of partial laws", to destroy all that hindered people from becoming "the brethren of the Great Family ... to make us love our fellow-creatures, and own that although social distinctions place others far higher or far lower than we, yet are human beings alike, as links of the same chain...". "I consider Mr. Dickens," declared Whitman, "to be a democratic writer."[1]

George Sand's novels were after Whitman's own heart. As editor of the Brooklyn *Eagle* he wrote with undisguised delight about one of her novels, in which a noble worker is depicted. In his appreciation of the work of this French authoress, who warred against the "evil" dominating the world, Whitman saw himself opposed to those narrow-minded American critics who disparaged Sand. He read Sand's novels *Consuelo* and *La Comtesse de Rudolstadt* in the journal *The Harbinger*, which was published by American followers of Fourier. Sand's ideas on the spiritual grandeur of simple workingmen and the ability of people from the lower depths of society to rise to the heights of art were particularly precious to him.

Apparently the poet was able to indulge his interest in Russian literature only after the Civil War, when the works of Turgenev and Tolstoy began to appear in English translations.

In one of his first articles for the Brooklyn *Eagle* Whitman said that he appreciated the full merit of "the beautiful creations of the great intellects of Europe"[2], the majesty of Shakespeare's work, the writings of Byron, Goethe and Europe's other great writers. However, he continued, one must reject those foreign writers who "laugh to scorn the idea of republican freedom and virtue"[3]. In the works of writers of his own country, the poet constantly looked for republican and democratic ideas, originality and the reflection of the real life of the American people.

Whitman's judgements on literature and social reality have much in common with the views upheld by a number of

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[1] *The Uncollected Poetry and Prose of Walt Whitman*, Vol. I, pp. 68-69.
[2] Ibid., p. 121.
[3] Ibid., p. 122.

American writers on the pages of the *Democratic Review*, a publication with which Whitman was well acquainted and which published some of his stories. In the middle of last century, a number of important American writers gathered around the *Democratic Review*. At various times Whittier, Lowell, Bryant and Poe all wrote for the journal.

Like Whitman himself, many who worked for the *Democratic Review* displayed antipathy toward the Whigs and the "Old Hunkers" that headed the Democratic Party. Their aesthetic views were shaped by the same dream of an uncompromisingly democratic literature. The stand taken by the *Democratic Review* as well as by Ralph Waldo Emerson in favor of a national literature served to strengthen Whitman's convictions on this subject.

By the time when Whitman reached maturity as a poet, the *Democratic Review* had ceased to exist. The editors could scarcely have attached much importance to the pieces Whitman wrote for the journal, and we cannot blame them, but the author of *Leaves of Grass* remembered the *Democratic Review* with deep respect. He considered that there was nothing in the United States comparable to this journal in the wealth of talent it represented. Of course, the poet was in heartfelt sympathy with demands of some of the critics working on the *Democratic Review* for the creation of a literature for the people, of poetry for the masses. These critics asserted that there was bound to appear in America a poet who would sing of the grandeur of human labor and the brotherhood and equality of men.

Among the American novelists whom Whitman particularly admired was James Fenimore Cooper. Many newspapers accused the author of the "Leather-Stocking" novels of aristocratic tendencies, but Walt Whitman keenly perceived the basic democratic principle underlying Cooper's view of the world. Whitman repeatedly remarked on the nobility and freshness of the novelist's work. Once, when he heard a speech by Cooper (apparently in court, during one of the suits that the novelist brought against hostile newspapers), he remarked that the author of the "Leather-Stocking" novels was like a shrewd farmer.

One of Whitman's works was published in a journal edited by Edgar Allan Poe. He was to recall amicably his meeting with Poe, but regarded Poe's poetry with considerable reserve. Whitman was not in raptures over the poem "The Raven",

which was first published in 1845 and was a resounding success with the reading public. Only many years later did the author of *Leaves of Grass* state his views about the poetry of Edgar Allan Poe with absolute clarity: "There is an undescribable magnetism about the poet's life and reminiscences, as well as the poems." Whitman said Poe's poetry belonged to "the electric lights of imaginative literature, brilliant and dazzling...". In Poe's poetry, Whitman writes, there is "an intense faculty for technical and abstract beauty, with the rhyming art to excess", but this poetry is lacking in warmth, in "the simpler affections of the heart...". Of course, this appraisal was far from just. Nevertheless, Whitman's comments on his greatest predecessor are extremely important, for they throw light on some specific features of his own creative work.

For Whitman there could be no poetry without "the simpler affections of the heart". The author of *Leaves of Grass* regarded the ordinary man as heroic. He championed a literature which would reproduce life realistically, and opposed the tendency "toward nocturnal themes" in his love for healthy beauty and the ideal of the unity of beauty and morality. "The perfect poem," according to Whitman, "is simple, healthy, natural—no griffins, angels, centaurs—no hysterics or blue-fire—no dyspepsia, no suicidal intentions." [1]

Whitman felt far more sympathy for the poetry of Bryant than for that of Poe. After Bryant's death he called him "the good, stainless, noble old citizen and poet". He also thought highly of Whittier. Whitman respected the moral power of the abolitionist poet, seeing in his poetry something akin to the measured tread of Cromwell's old veterans. Still, Whittier's religious views were alien to Whitman and he once remarked that although there was something magnificent in Whittier, he was at the same time somehow narrow and ascetic.

The author of *Leaves of Grass* looked for health, love of the people and natural qualities also in painting, the theater and music. He was an avid theater-goer, never missing any productions of Shakespeare's plays, but he had a low opinion of American dramaturgy. Whitman called for America to overcome its "slavish dependence" on monarchical England in the realm of theater, and explained that he was saying it "in no spirit of national antipathy, a feeling we hate". The theater

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[1] G. W. Allen, *The Solitary Singer*, p. 132.

must glorify freedom and destroy despotism, "it can attack and hold up to scorn bigotry, fashionable affectation, avarice..." [1].

Whitman was very fond of the visual arts and he long treasured the memory of pictures or statues seen at the World Fair of 1853 in New York. The text has been preserved of a speech made by Whitman in the early fifties to the artists of Brooklyn. He insistently emphasized the link between art and life, art and the emancipatory movements of the people, and called on the artists to seek inspiration in the great, heroic deeds "written in the pages of history". "Read," he said, "how slaves have battled against their oppressors...", and he pointed out that tyrants had never been able to "put down the unquenchable thirst of man for his rights".[2]

Let the heroism born of the urge for freedom live on canvas and in sculpture!

The poet valued his friendships with leading American artists. In his younger years he frequently saw the painter Walter Libby, whom he praised for being true to life. The sculptor Henry Kirke Brown was also a friend of the poet. Brown played an important role in the development of the realistic movement in mid-nineteenth century American art. After the Civil War the major realistic artist Thomas Eakins became a friend of Whitman's, but at the time we are dealing with, the poet was mostly surrounded by young, inexperienced painters and sculptors, many of whom he met in Brown's studio.

These people probably knew very little about Whitman's poetry, but those separately published poems they had seen, the poet's ideas on art, and the very appearance of this simple, democratically-minded man induced one of the artists to call him Beranger. The nickname stuck. Several of the artists had learned about Beranger while they were in Europe studying painting. Whitman listened attentively to stories about the popular French poet told by one of Brown's young pupils, John Quincy Ward, who was later to become one of America's most important sculptors and to create many wonderful sculptures of his fellow-countrymen.

Whitman's aesthetic taste was determined by his democratic feelings. The poet was almost infallibly drawn to all that was

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[1] *The Uncollected Poetry and Prose...*, Vol. I, p. 152.

[2] Ibid., p. 246.

sound and healthy in literature and art. In his old age Whitman had this to say about an exhibition of the pictures of the great French artist Jean François Millet: "Never before have I been so penetrated by this kind of expression." He saw *The Sower, The Diggers, The Angelus* and several other works by Millet. The poet appreciated the artist's mastery, the perfection of his art, and at the same time saw in Millet a magnificent example of an artist endowed with a high moral purpose, a purpose which the poet was convinced lay in a warm sympathy for the sufferings of the French peasantry and a confirmation of the right of the masses to rise up against their enslavers.

It took a good deal of revolutionary insight to detect in the pictures of Millet, depicting people tormented by oppression and poverty, the key to the events of the French revolution, but Whitman possessed that insight. He wrote that Millet's pictures "told the full story of what went before and necessitated the great French revolution — the long precedent crushing of the masses of a heroic people into the earth, in abject poverty, hunger — every right denied, humanity attempted to put back for generations — yet Nature's force, titanic here, the stronger and hardier for that repression — waiting terribly to break forth, revengeful — the pressure on the dykes, and the bursting at last — the storming of the Bastille — the execution of the king and queen...".

It is impossible to understand Walt Whitman if one ignores his democratic instinct and revolutionary insight. Nor can his work be understood without taking into account the influence music had on him.

In the years when he was composing the first poems for *Leaves of Grass,* music played a truly colossal role in his life. In the period before the Civil War, he drew a great deal of pleasure from opera, especially Italian compositions. He tried never to miss the best European singers on tour in the United States and was always speaking about his visits to the opera with delight. In "Specimen Days" the poet lists the works he had heard by Rossini, Verdi, Auber, and Donizetti, and discusses the relative merits of various singers.

Whitman would recall opera music in various connections. While admiring the bright colors of the sunset over New York harbor, the poet compared his feelings to the insatiable longing for lovely sounds he felt when listening to Bettini in Donizetti's opera *La Favorita,* when the singer's fresh, powerful voice

brought tears of joy to his eyes. Whitman said that the singing of Bettini and Alboni had given him much exalted pleasure; on another occasion he spoke of his "musical passion".

Whitman was also passionately fond of American folk songs. Sometimes he would speak of those who sang these sincere songs of the people, this music of the heart, with even more warmth than of the acknowledged operatic masters. In an article on the musical Cheney Family, the poet wrote that their performance was "something original and beautiful", since it contained absolutely no ridiculous sentimentality or anti-republican spirit. (It is interesting that this article was published in a journal edited by Edgar Allan Poe, who publicly expressed his agreement with "our correspondent throughout".)

Whitman's deep love for music, during the years when he was writing the first poems for *Leaves of Grass*, undoubtedly played a role in his development as a poet. He remarked on this himself: "My younger life was so saturated with the emotions, raptures, up-lifts of ... musical experiences that it would be surprising indeed if all my future work had not been colored by them." [1] It was not by chance that Whitman called almost all of his most important poetic works "songs": "Song of Myself", "Song of the Open Road", "Song of the Broad-Axe", "A Song of Joys", etc. One cannot count all the images in *Leaves of Grass* which are connected with music and with songs.

Having studied the mocking-bird's tones
and the flight of the mountain-hawk,
And heard at dawn the unrivall'd one,
the hermit thrush from the swamp-cedars,
Solitary, singing in the West, I strike up
for a New World.

These are the lines from the introduction to "Starting from Paumanok".

One of Whitman's best-known poems is "I Hear America Singing" (1860). In the poem "When Lilacs Last in the Dooryard Bloom'd" (1865-66) the theme of song is heard over and over again. In "The Mystic Trumpeter" (1872), the

[1] H. Traubel, *With Walt Whitman in Camden*, 1915, p. 174.

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trumpeter's music is an embodiment of the very spirit of poetry:

Hark, some wild trumpeter, some strange musician,
Hovering unseen in air, vibrates capricious tunes to-night.

I hear thee trumpeter, listening alert I catch thy notes,
Now pouring, whirling like a tempest round me,
Now low, subdued, now in the distance lost.

And it is so in Whitman's poetry, its music sometimes subdued as though lost in the distance, carressing the ear and arousing the subtlest of feelings, and sometimes pouring, whirling like a tempest, drawing us into its own stormy motion.

"Give Us Turbulence"

The early sixties saw the beginning of the war with the South, but one could not describe the previous ten years as a lull before the storm; bloody events in Kansas heralded the approaching Civil War. Arms were finally used to decide the long debated problem of whether this state would be free or open to slavery. The editor of a Kansas paper which campaigned for the abolition of slavery was a friend of Whitman's, the young journalist John Swinton. The battles in Kansas were the sharpest expression of the constant struggle between the forces of the North and the South, and the fifties were electrified by the growing revolutionary mood. The rapid expansion of industrial production on the eve of the Civil War hastened the military conflict.

If one were to judge solely by the state of affairs in Washington, one might conclude that the southern plantation owners were steadily strengthening their position. For a whole decade before the war, the presidency was held by supporters of slavery. A year before the publication of *Leaves of Grass*, the so-called "Missouri compromise", which had been in force for more than thirty years, was, to all intents and purposes, annulled, and the Southerners were given the opportunity to introduce slavery in regions of the country which had previously been closed to them.

In his *Democratic Vistas*, written after the war, Whitman makes the following remarks: "A foreigner, an acute and good

man, had impressively said to me, that day (the author refers to the pre-war time.— *M.M.*)—putting in form, indeed, my own observations: '... And I have found your vaunted America honeycomb'd from top to toe with infidelism, even to itself and its own programme. I have mark'd the brazen hell-faces of secession and slavery gazing defiantly from all the windows and doorways.'"

This is what Whitman's America was like just before the Civil War. But the forces opposed to that America which defended slavery or came to terms with it, were making their presence felt more and more.

In the mid-fifties there appeared in the United States a new party of national importance, the Republican Party. This was a bourgeois party, but among the Republicans there were a great many honest champions of democracy and genuine enemies of slavery. The Republicans adopted several slogans from the Free Soilers. On the eve of the war the Republican Party nominated Abraham Lincoln for president, and millions of working people gave it support. At that very time the ideas of Marxism, the teachings of scientific socialism began to penetrate the country. Whitman could scarcely have known of them, but like thousands of other Americans he had certainly been acquainted with utopian socialist ideas.

Walt was five years old when Robert Owen twice addressed the American legislators, once by invitation of the House of Representatives, and once by invitation of the president. In his speeches this utopian socialist expressed his hope for the foundation of a society which would guarantee the happiness of every man.

The utopian colony founded by Owen in America in 1825 ("The New Harmony") had dissolved long before Whitman was consciously aware of what was going on in the world around him. But the American followers of Fourier were quite active by the time Whitman was fully grown. The Fourierist Albert Brisbane published his book *Social Destiny of Man* in 1840. In it he described the world of the future as a kingdom of culture and beauty. In Brisbane's opinion it would be easiest of all in America to put Fourier's ideas into practice. Another outstanding Fourierist was Park Godwin, the son-in-law of the poet Bryant. In the mid-forties he published a book in which he protested against the division of contemporary society into

two classes, one of which possessed everything, and the other nothing.

In 1841 the Brook Farm colony was founded, based on a rather original interpretation of Fourierist principles (several notable American writers took part in the venture, including Nathaniel Hawthorne). The colony, whose members strove to combine physical labor with spiritual development and moral improvement, lasted only a few years, but it attracted a great deal of interest. During these years several dozen other colonies were founded in the USA, all by people trying in some way to follow Fourier's teaching.

An active writer like Whitman, of course, could not bypass utopian socialism. There is no doubt that he read the *New York Tribune*, in which Fourierist articles appeared, and even the journal which was published by the members of the Brook Farm colony.

At times the poet offered sober criticism of some of the more vulnerable features of Fourierism. On some occasions Whitman was taken in by the philistine interpretation of this social teaching. In any case an article which the poet wrote while in New Orleans contains the following: "... but to us it seems a great objection (against Fourierism.— *M.M.*) that nobody, as far as we learn from the system, is to do anything but *be happy*. Now who would peel potatoes and scrub the floors?" [1]

Nevertheless, Whitman's ideas about "a great city", the city "of the faithfullest friends", ran along approximately the same lines as the dreams of both Owen and Fourier. Most probably the ideas of Marx were quite unknown to Whitman before the war, despite the fact that several American friends of the poet not only knew Marx's work, but Marx himself personally.

One of the participants in the Brook Farm experiment was Charles A. Dana, who later edited the *New York Tribune* together with Horace Greeley. Dana, who was a warm friend of the poet, visited Marx, together with Brisbane, in 1848. Describing the experience, Brisbane characterized the author of the *Communist Manifesto* as the leader of a movement of the people, and wrote that in Marx he felt "the passionate fire of a daring spirit".[2] Soon Dana invited Marx to write for the *New*

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[1] *The Uncollected Poetry and Prose...*, Vol. I, p. 229.
[2] *Mainstream*, 1963, May, p. 8.

York Tribune, and Marx's articles appeared in the paper for many years. It is impossible to say for certain whether Whitman read them; we know only that the poet followed the *New York Tribune* with great interest. Some of his own poems were published in it.

A significant part of Whitman's publicistic writing in the fifties advocated the deepening of bourgeois democracy. He continued to fight the institution of slavery, but the pages of the newspapers were usually closed to his abolitionist articles. An attempt to defend the position of the Free Soilers proved costly for the poet: he lost his position on a newspaper yet again.

This occurred when he was working for the *Brooklyn Times*. In the late fifties, already after the appearance of *Leaves of Grass*, circumstances forced Whitman to take a job on this paper, since after his father's death in 1855 he had assumed the greater share of the burden of supporting his mother and his retarded brother Eddy. For a long time the poet had also been living under the burden of a large debt which he could not pay off. He worked as editor of the *Brooklyn Times* for two years, until he lent his support to a certain judge E.D. Culver.

This man, a member of a Baptist church, was "guilty" of protesting against the use of biblical texts to justify slavery. Not only was the judge dismissed from his own church; many other church organizations joined in the attack on him. Whitman expressed his support for Culver in unequivocal terms.

The editor was warned that if he persisted in defending the abolitionist, he would have to deal with influential and dangerous opponents; but he did not give ground.

His independence of views led to the usual result.

Soon Whitman was forced to leave his post. There exists a direct statement by one of the workers on the *Brooklyn Times* that Whitman lost his job because of his articles which were received with hostility by the clergy and important church members.

An entry in his diary shows how much all this must have meant for him. In mid-1859 Whitman wrote the following exhortation to himself: "It is now time to *stir* first for *Money* enough, *to live and provide for M—*." [1] Apparently the letter *M* stood for the poet's mother.

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[1] *The Uncollected Poetry and Prose...*, Vol. II, p. 91.

For some time Whitman copied documents, but it was hard to earn a living that way; besides, lack of money was not the poet's only torment. He chafed at his inability to express fully his anger against the institution of slavery and the abuse of democracy in his homeland. Since most of the large and influential American newspapers were swayed by the spirit of compromise, the author of *Leaves of Grass* decided to address his passionate word of protest to his fellow-countrymen in a different way.

Among Whitman's papers which lay forgotten for decades after his death, there are the notes for lectures which he was intending to give at that time. He did not plan to become a lecturer in the usual sense, but a wandering orator, as it were. "I desire," he wrote, "to go by degrees through all These States.... Lecturing (my own way) henceforth my employment...."[1] The central theme of his lectures was to be slavery.

Whitman was not able to carry out his intention, but it is worthwhile paying some attention to his plans. According to Whitman, his task as a "wander-speaker" was to save democracy, and the prototype the poet intended to follow was that of an orator at an Anti-Slavery Meeting. In Whitman's notes there emerges the image of a man given over completely to the exalted task of eradicating slavery. He "ascends the platform, silent, rapid, stern, almost fierce—and delivers an oration of liberty—up-braiding, full of invective—with enthusiasm".[2]

In his notes for the lectures, Whitman truly subjects the supporters of slavery to merciless invective, and he is full of enthusiasm. Any man who aids in the preservation of slavery, writes the poet, "is himself the worst slave..."[3]. Indifference to this barbarous institution is a heinous crime. There are revolutionary overtones in Whitman's notes; the "orator" makes a direct call for armed resistance to the slave owners. True, Whitman was not always absolutely consistent in his hostility to slavery, appearing at times only as a supporter of the Wilmot Proviso, but in general the revolutionary principle is expressed even more clearly in Whitman's notes for

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[1] *Whitman's Workshop*, p. 197.
[2] Ibid., p. 74.
[3] Ibid.

"lectures" than in his newspaper articles. The notes have more passion and fire. In the poet's notes we find the following words: "It is not events of danger and threatening storms that I dread. Give us turbulence, give us excitement, give us the rage and disputes of hell, all this rather than this lethargy of death that spreads like a vapor of decaying corpses over our land.—Give us anything rather than this, beat the drums of war."[1]

These are not empty words. The orator is suggesting that Americans raise "the iron arm of rebellion"[2] against the fugitive slave law. In spite of all the government legislation the planters must not be allowed to break into homes in order to bring back their runaway "property".

In the mind of the man who was preparing to become a travelling orator, rage against the slave owners was combined with an ever more critical attitude toward the organization of American society in general. "At present," we read in his notes for "lectures", "all give lip service enough but neither in manners, nor courts of law, nor in the spirit of literature (except in the cheap mass-papers) do I perceive any real Democracy.—I know nothing more treacherous than the position of nearly all the eminent persons in These States toward the Spirit of Democracy—."[3] It is easy to see why Whitman did not think it was possible to call the American people happy.

The outlines for "lectures" were never used. Whitman was unable to overcome the difficulties facing a solitary "lecturer" unaided by any organization. Nevertheless, we shall see that in *Leaves of Grass* the poet often appears in the guise of a wandering orator, a penniless enthusiast boldly striking at the enemies of liberty and calling his friends to the struggle for the exalted goals of democracy.

The other attempt of Whitman the publicist to tell the people the truth about slave owners also fell through. In 1856 the poet prepared for print a pamphlet entitled "The Eighteenth Presidency". The type was already set. The author was hoping that with the help of "editors of the independent press" or "rich persons" his essay would reach the masses. He

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[1] Ibid., p. 81.
[2] Ibid., p. 77.
[3] Ibid., p. 54.

was anxious to make his pamphlet available to every "Young Man in the nation, North, South, East and West".

Nothing of the sort happened. The pamphlet was not actually published and its proof-sheets lay unread until the end of the nineteen twenties. Only then, at last, was this prose work issued in a small edition.

What did the poet say in this pamphlet? It must be admitted that in places Whitman paid homage to the spirit of compromise (for instance, he says that he is willing to obey all existing laws); but anyone who reads the pamphlet carefully will soon see that the message of "The Eighteenth Presidency" lies first of all in its unyielding, basically revolutionary condemnation of "the three hundred and fifty thousand" American slave owners. Whitman declared that these men, "altogether the most impudent persons that have yet appeared in the history of lands" have "pistol'd, bludgeoned, yelled and threatened America, the past twenty years into one long train of cowardly concessions..." [1].

The author continues: "In fifteen of the States the three hundred and fifty thousand masters keep down the true people, the millions of white citizens, mechanics, farmers, boatmen, manufacturers, and the like, excluding them from politics and from office, and punishing by the lash, by tar and feathers, binding fast to rafts on the river or trees in the woods, and sometimes by death, all attempts to discuss the evils of slavery in its relations to the whites.... Over the vast continental tracts of unorganized American territory ... the whole executive, judicial, military, and naval power of These States is forsworn to the people, the rightful owners, and sworn to the help of the three hundred & fifty thousand masters of slaves.... Slavery is adopted as an American institution, superior, national, constitutional, right in itself, and under no circumstances to take any less than freedom takes. Nor is that all; to-day, to-night, the constables and commissioners of the President can by law step into any part of These States and pick out whom they please, deciding which man or woman they will allow to be free, and which shall be a slave...." [2]

Although Whitman at times takes the position of those Americans who, by idealizing the country's constitution

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[1] *Whitman's Workshop*, p. 95.
[2] Ibid., pp. 96-97.

actually justified some of the actions of the slave owners, the most important point in the pamphlet is the demand to eradicate the very system of slavery since it is hostile to the interests of both blacks and whites. Whitman calls for a struggle against the fugitive slave law and warns the slave owners that "circles of death"[1] are closing in around them.

It is important that the pamphlet does not simply express hatred of slavery in general. In the merciless battle that was then going on in Kansas, Whitman took the side of the Free Soilers. Speaking to the slave owners he asked: "Suppose you get Kansas, do you think it would be ended?" No, he answered, if the agents of "the three hundred and fifty thousand" succeed in getting hold of the disputed territory, "then would the melt begin in These States that would not cool till Kansas should be redeemed, as of course it would be".[2]

Despite his conviction that the slave owners would be defeated in the end, Whitman viewed the situation which had developed in the country with a sinking heart. Everywhere he saw gloomy faces, everywhere there was oppression and despair. At present the "stifling atmosphere ... makes all the millions of farmers and mechanics of These States the helpless supple-jacks of a comparatively few politicians.... In the North and East, swarms of dough-faces, office-vermin, kept editor ignorant of principles, the true glory of a man...".[3]

To a great extent "The Eighteenth Presidency" is a satire in which the author characterizes the political leaders of the United States with words filled with fury.

He includes in his pamphlet a call to battle, warning his readers that either they would abolish slavery, or it would abolish them. Filled with a militant faith in the triumph of justice Whitman writes in conclusion: "... never did the idea of equality erect itself so haughty and uncompromising amid inequality, as to-day. Never were such sharp questions asked as to-day. Never was there more eagerness to know. Never was the representative man more energetic, more like a god, than to-day.... On all sides tyrants tremble...."[4]

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[1] Ibid., p. 110.
[2] Ibid.
[3] Ibid., pp. 94-95.
[4] Ibid., p. 113.

"I Do Not Rank High in Market Valuations"

Some years ago in the United States the 1855 edition of *Leaves of Grass* was reproduced in full as a separate book, containing the poems "Song of Myself", "The Sleepers", "I Sing the Body Electric", "Europe" and eight other works as they originally appeared over a hundred years ago.

It is not difficult to see that there are important points of difference between the original edition and the more recent one. In the latter, for instance, Whitman's poems have the familiar titles, but initially they were published without headings. When the first edition of *Leaves of Grass* was re-issued in 1959, it carried the author's name, which did not appear on the 1855 edition.

Whitman's first collection of poetry was a rather slim book in large format. The author's name, I repeat, was printed neither on the binding nor on the title page. The book, however, did contain a portrait of the author and a note that publication rights were held by Walter Whitman. One of the poems also contained a reference to "Walt Whitman, an American, one of the roughs, a kosmos...".[1]

So there was Walter Whitman, owner of the rights to the book, but there was also Walt Whitman, the hero of "Song of Myself". This Walt (not Walter) was an ordinary American, a man whom the reader could call by a familiar diminutive.

The poet clearly intended to time the publication of his book so that it would fall on his beloved Independence Day, but the first announcement that the book was on sale appeared in the *New York Tribune* only on the sixth of July, two days after the holiday. In the announcement two firms, "Swayne" and "Fowler and Wells", were mentioned, in whose shops the book could be purchased for two dollars.

There was virtually no demand for *Leaves of Grass*. The great majority of the thousand copies that made up the first edition were given away by the author to newspapers and other publications, to well-known writers, friends and even to people he did not know. The material loss was borne by the writer himself, since he had published the book at his own expense in the printing shop of his friends, the Rome brothers.

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[1] W. Whitman, *Leaves of Grass*, 1928, p. 565.

The next year Fowler and Wells agreed to accept responsibility for distributing a second, considerably enlarged, edition of *Leaves of Grass*. They knew, of course, how false it was to claim that the first edition had sold quickly, but *Leaves of Grass* had received the approval of an authority like Emerson (the binding of the second edition bore his words, "I greet you at the beginning of a great career...."), and the firm hoped to make a profit.

Despite Emerson's recommendation, the second edition met with no success either. The book sold badly, and Whitman's attempt to republish *Leaves of Grass* a year later fell through. On the eve of the Civil War the poet was so poor that it was out of the question to publish the book again at his own expense.

One of Whitman's friends, however, recommended his poetry to two young publishers, Thayer and Eldridge, and this new firm agreed to publish and distribute a third edition of *Leaves of Grass*. The book came out in 1860 with every promise of success, but soon military actions began, the demand for literature fell and the publishers declared bankruptcy. The printed sheets of Whitman's book fell into the hands of swindlers, who sold *Leaves of Grass* without paying the author any royalties.

All in all *Leaves of Grass* was published about ten times during the author's lifetime, and it was only very rarely that a "commercial" publisher could be found to relieve the author of the burden of printing and distributing his book. There were very few years in which Whitman's poetry was a source of any significant income.

"I do not rank high in market valuations...," [1] the poet once said. His books were never in demand, except when *Leaves of Grass* was subject to legal prosecution, which attracted the curiosity of scandal-mongers.

This could not but cost the poet much suffering. He lived in almost constant poverty, but worse still, Whitman, who addressed his poems to the people, who dreamed of a mass audience, simply could not reach that audience during his lifetime.

True, Whitman's writings were highly valued by certain Americans, and their kind words brightened his life. The poet was also mentioned in the press. But generally the most

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[1] H. Traubel, *With Walt Whitman in Camden*, 1915, p. 226.

influential papers in the United States spoke of him with derision. The American people were unaware that a poet who was their spokesman, their glory and their hope was living in the country. In the nineteenth century very few workingmen in the United States could break through the invisible barriers separating them from this marvellous wellspring of national poetry.

Certain literary men in America and in England have helped to surround Whitman with an atmosphere of hostility. It would be wrong to suppose, however, that all American literary critics were opposed to *Leaves of Grass*. Among the several dozen reviews of Whitman's poetry, which appeared in the United States in mid-century, there were some friendly ones.

The *New York Tribune* was ahead of the others in expressing a rather favorable opinion about the first edition of *Leaves of Grass*. Its reviewer, Charles Dana, was practically the first to comment publicly (since Emerson's letter was not intended for the press) on the poet's unusual poetic gift. The review also contained some critical remarks, especially about the "indecency" of Whitman's language in his love lyrics.

One of the early editions of *Leaves of Grass* was also appraised highly in a serious journal, the *North American Review* (at the beginning of the twentieth century this same journal opened its pages to the anti-imperialist writings of Mark Twain). Edward Hale a well-known literary figure, wrote in the *North American Review* that Whitman's poetry was outstanding for its freshness, simplicity and veracity.

But these reviews did not affect the attitude of the majority of newspapers and magazines. The appearance of Whitman's book was met in the press with a storm of abuse. The New York *Criterion* called upon the law to deal with "this obscenity".

The *Boston Intelligencer* declared Whitman's verses to be a "heterogeneous mass of bombast, egotism, vulgarity and nonsense", and even suggested that he be physically punished: "...we can conceive of no better reward than the lash for such a violation of decency." [1] And the *Boston Post* declared in 1860 that "both Whitman's *Leaves* and Emerson's laudation had a common origin in temporary insanity!" [2]

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[1] *The Shock of Recognition*, p. 247.

[2] R. M. Bucke, *Walt Whitman*, Philadelphia, McRay, 1883, p. 201.

Whitman's book caused irritation and was subject to vicious persecution in England as well. Thus, the *London Critic* in April 1857 wrote that "Walt Whitman is as unacquainted with art as a hog with mathematics".[1] *Leaves of Grass* is a "dirty" book, said another English journal. And the London *Literary Gazette* simply announced that "of all the writers we have ever perused Walt Whitman is the most silly, the most blasphemous, and the most disgusting".[2] It is no wonder that shortly before his death the poet said to his friend Traubel, "The world now can have no idea of the bitterness of the feeling against me in those early days."[3]

It is interesting that the first comments on the author of *Leaves of Grass* to appear in the Russian press (the reference was based on English sources) raised emphatic doubts about his moral principles. This was in 1861.

Modern literary historians still believe that the basic reason for the undisguised annoyance with which the American press greeted Whitman's poetry before the Civil War was the alleged indecency of certain lines in *Leaves of Grass*. But was that hostile attitude really caused by Whitman's refusal to observe puritan norms in literature? The question deserves some attention.

In dozens of his poems Whitman sang the love between man and woman, the joy of mutual affection, the bright happiness which the nearness of a loved one brings, the purity and charm of natural human relations. The author of *Leaves of Grass*, who, with a power and strength unequalled in American poetry glorified the majesty of the spiritual love binding people together, wanted also to rehabilitate physical love in the eyes of the Americans, who had been brought up in the traditions of puritanism.

Whitman condemned priggish "modesty", the idea that absolutely everything in man, apart from his "sacred" spirit is dirty and shameful. The poet not only disagreed with the hypocrites who upheld false conceptions of virtue; he defied them.

In the poem "I Sing the Body Electric" (1855), he calls a man "that corrupted his own live body" foolish and insists, "If any thing is sacred the human body is sacred...." He exclaims ecstatically:

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[1] H. S. Canby, *Walt Whitman*, p. 123.
[2] R. M. Bucke, *Walt Whitman*, p. 202.
[3] E. L. Masters, *Whitman*, p. 99.

The love of the body of man or woman balks account,
the body itself balks account,
That of the male is perfect, and that of the female is
perfect.

The expression of the face balks account,
But the expression of a well-made man appears not
only in his face,
It is in his limbs and joints also, it is curiously in
the joints of his hips and wrists,
It is in his walk, the carriage of his neck, the flex
of his waist and knees, dress does not hide
him,
The strong sweet quality he has strikes through the
cotton and broadcloth,
To see him pass conveys as much as the best poem,
perhaps more....

The poem "Song of Myself" joyfully portrays "a few light kisses, a few embraces, a reaching around of arms...". In "Song of the Open Road" Whitman praises the "majestic" men and the "greatest" women, "dancers at wedding-dances, kissers of brides, tender helpers of children, bearers of children". Throughout *Leaves of Grass*, as in the little notebook, he is not only "the poet of the soul" but also of "the body". Many beautiful images express his spontaneous, lively and harmonious way of seeing the world. In "I Sing the Body Electric", Whitman wrote:

And if the body does not do fully as much as the soul?
And if the body were not the soul, what is the soul?

This poem is a song of love for a woman, a song which is at once passionate, chaste and truthful, yet absolutely free from naturalistic tendencies. This is a love both tender and sensuous, physical and yet full of deep emotion. Whitman exclaims:

This is the female form,
A divine nimbus exhales from it from head to foot,
It attracts with fierce undeniable attraction....

The poet speaks with amazing ingenuousness about the "bridegroom night of love" passing "surely and softly into

the prostrate dawn", and concludes this part of the poem with a hymn to the woman, who is both lover and mother, who is "the gates of the body, and ... the gates of the soul".

In his eagerness to express his love for human beings and to deal a blow at the hypocrites, Whitman sometimes lost his sense of proportion. For instance, "I Sing the Body Electric" contains a boring catalogue of parts of the body ("... wrist and wrist-joints, hand, palm, knuckles, thumb.... The lung-sponges, the stomach-sac, the bowels sweet and clean...", etc., etc.). Still his hero is a man with a pure soul and genuinely human passions, a stranger to prudishness. The author of *Leaves of Grass* was very severe in his condemnation of dissolute, immoral people.

He could not stand, for instance, the humor of "male company" and disliked erotic stories and conversations. Though he praised the normal man who is free in the expression of his feelings, Whitman spoke indignantly about the advocates of so-called "free love". In an article of his he called them mental freaks.

No matter how much cause for indignation the poet gave the critics when he wrote about the "mad filaments" and "ungovernable shoots" of bodily passion, his work was rejected by the bourgeois press not only (or even basically) because of such lines. What aroused their hostility was primarily the democratic nature of his poetry, its revolutionary spirit.

A rather symptomatic review of the poet's verse appeared before the Civil War in a religious paper. The reviewer was most incensed because the author of *Leaves of Grass* disapproved of well-to-do people.

Such attitudes to Whitman's work are often dismissed by historians of literature with a shrug, as though they are not worthy of serious attention. Indeed, in reviews of the poet's early revilers there were certainly a great many absurd statements and inept phrases which deserve derision. But occasionally these articles also revealed the real causes for their authors' hostility to Whitman.

Only when one realizes how powerful were those who opposed Whitman, forcing him to defend even the very right to publish his work, can one understand the circumstances which produced his "self-reviews". Soon after the appearance of the first edition of *Leaves of Grass*, Whitman published several articles about his own book, either under a pen-name

or anonymously. He quite often repeated this practice later. In his old age, Whitman confessed with embarrassment that in publishing reviews of *Leaves of Grass* under pseudonyms he was really acting against his own inclinations, but we must bear in mind that the poet's articles about his own poems were not ordinary newspaper or magazine reviews.

He did not simply want to demonstrate the virtues of the book under consideration. His aim was to *explain* the new, and, for the reader, incomprehensible, phenomenon which was called *Leaves of Grass*. Whitman's "self-reviews" are a kind of continuation of the book. In them he wrote of the author of *Leaves of Grass* in more or less the same tone used in "Song of Myself" about the hero of the poem. It is no accident that Whitman's articles resemble his poetry even in their style: lyrical and rich in images.

Of course, the poet's "self-reviews" could strike one as extremely self-laudatory. Rejecting allegations of "immodesty", Whitman exclaimed in the *United States Review*: "An American bard at last!" *Leaves of Grass*, declared the self-reviewer in a challenging voice, is the creation of "one of the roughs, large, proud, affectionate, eating, drinking and breeding...." The reader is introduced into the atmosphere of *Leaves of Grass* as it were.

Emerson, Lincoln and Others...

Who offered the poet moral support in the difficult days when the early editions of *Leaves of Grass* met mostly with abuse? Within Whitman's family poetry aroused no interest. In any case, his relatives had no time for poetry in the mid-fifties. A few days after the publication of *Leaves of Grass*, Whitman's father died and the family was immediately faced with a great many difficult problems. They had practically no savings, and both Louisa Whitman and Walt's sick brother had to be supported.

The poet's brother George said that he had seen *Leaves of Grass*, but had only glanced through it. He also said that the poet's mother regarded Whitman's collection of poetry in the same way. Other members of the family probably even harbored resentment against Walt. Several times he had given up work they understood, work as a builder, which brought in earnings, in order to write his strange poems. George recalled

with some malice that his brother would get up late, write for a few hours if he felt like it, and finally go off somewhere or other for the rest of the day. "We were all at work — all except Walt!" [1]

Even his mother, who loved her second son immensely, objected when someone remarked that Walt Whitman was a house-builder; no, she said, not Walt, but his brother.

The author of *Leaves of Grass* could draw the strength to hold out only from sources outside his family. He was encouraged, of course, by the few positive opinions expressed in the press; but what undoubtedly gave him the most pleasure were Emerson's warm words about his poetry.

Of course, Ralph Waldo Emerson was not the only American writer to whom the poet sent his book, but many important poets were only angered by Whitman's verses. It is said, for instance, that Whittier, a strict moralist, simply threw his copy of *Leaves of Grass* into the fire. Emerson had subscribed to some of the puritan traditions, but he showed remarkable boldness of thought by treating Whitman as an equal. The philosopher called Whitman's poetry the most extraordinary piece of wisdom his country had produced.

His interest in the personality of a poet who possessed such an astoundingly broad view of the world induced Emerson to visit him in New York, where Whitman gave him a hearty but undaunted welcome, even though Emerson had already won recognition from the intellectual circles of America.

Among writers who were close to Emerson and made Whitman's acquaintance was Bronson Alcott. He found in Whitman something tender, but also full of power and audacity and even defiance. Alcott remembered the simplicity of Whitman's clothing and the unpretentious manner of his behavior and speech. Whitman must have been greatly pleased by his intelligent and subtle guest's obvious approval of *Leaves of Grass.*

Even before the Civil War Whitman had attracted the attention of several other progressive Americans. Significantly, there were several Fourierists among the first champions of *Leaves of Grass.* Most of his supporters, however, were people fighting against slavery, who did not share Fourierist ideas.

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[1] H. S. Canby, *Walt Whitman*, p. 84.

Soon after his return from Kansas, the abolitionist John Swinton became acquainted with the poet and remained his friend for life.

On the eve of the war between North and South, another staunch opponent of slavery, Frank Sanborn, became attached to Whitman seeing in him a true companion-in-arms. Sanborn took part in military clashes between John Brown's followers and the slave owners, for which he stood trial in Boston. The poet happened to be there (he was reading the proofs of the third edition of *Leaves of Grass*) and went to the court-house, intending (as he said later) to wrest Sanborn from the arms of "justice" by force, if necessary.

In Boston the poet also made the acquaintance of William O'Connor, who played an important role in his life; but it was only some years later that the poet grew really close to the abolitionist O'Connor and his wife Nelly.

The Whitmans were old friends of the Price family. All his life the poet felt a deep sympathy for Abby, the mistress of their house and one of the most active abolitionists in Brooklyn, and for her daughter Helen. From the fifties onwards, the Price household became a second home for Walt Whitman, a home where people were interested not just in his health but in his poetry as well. Helen Price recalled that the poet took great pleasure in conversing with her mother about the spiritual nature of man and the struggle for social changes then going on.

There is evidence (contested by some students of Whitman) that shortly after the appearance of the first edition (or the first two) of *Leaves of Grass*, Abraham Lincoln read the book. Henry Rankin, one of Lincoln's junior partners in legal practice, stated in memoirs published after the poet's death that Lincoln was already attracted to Whitman's verse when he was living in Springfield. Rankin wrote that Whitman's *Leaves of Grass* was one of the few new collections of poetry which interested Lincoln. According to Rankin, Lincoln "commended the new poet's verses, for their virility, freshness, unconventional sentiments, and unique forms of expression...". If we are to believe the author of these memoirs, Lincoln even "claimed that Whitman gave promise of a new school of poetry".[1]

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[1] G. W. Allen, *The Solitary Singer*, p. 175.

No matter how many kind words were said about *Leaves of Grass* by Lincoln and others soon after the book came out, they had very little effect at the time on the readers' attitude to Whitman. Very few people knew of these favorable opinions.

Ralph Waldo Emerson was a different matter. On the insistence of the editors of the *New York Tribune*, Emerson's letter to Whitman was published in the paper. This annoyed Emerson; nor was he happy about the fact that a quotation from the letter had been printed on the cover of the second edition of *Leaves of Grass*. Nevertheless, as far as we know, Emerson did not reproach Whitman for this. At first he himself did a great deal to get the book more readers, forwarding it, for instance, to the English philosopher Thomas Carlyle. In the accompanying letter, dated May 6, 1856, *Leaves of Grass* is called an "indisputably American" book; but this is preceded by the remark that it is "a nondescript monster" with "terrible eyes and buffalo strength...".[1]

Emerson continued to see Whitman; he followed his work and willingly counseled the poet. The "Sage of Concord" was the leader of a group of writers and philosophers, the "transcendentalists", who criticized the selfishness and spiritual squalor of the money-grubber from a romantic viewpoint. At the same time he confidently predicted the growth of a genuinely national and democratic art in the United States. Emerson could not fail to see in *Leaves of Grass* something corresponding to his own ideas. He was drawn to Whitman and wished to see in him a true pupil, fellow-thinker and successor. But soon sceptical notes began to appear in Emerson's comments on Whitman. There were many reasons for this. Whitman's democratic inclinations occasionally shocked Emerson. He recalled with amazement how Whitman, during one of his meetings with the philosopher, decided to go to "a noisy fire-engine society" and took Emerson with him, and "was like a boy over it...".[2]

Intrinsically, Emerson was an individualist; moreover, he tended toward rationalism. Whitman, the carpenter and friend of coachmen, was a very different sort of person. This is probably why in one letter Emerson called

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[1] *The Shock of Recognition*, p. 252.
[2] Ibid., p. 278.

him "our wild Whitman", who is "choked by Titanic abdomen...".[1]

The author of *Leaves of Grass*, who was attracted more and more to materialism, and the idealist Emerson were also separated by their philosophical views. In the early forties Emerson said: "What is popularly called Transcendentalism among us, is Idealism; Idealism as it appears in 1842. As thinkers, mankind have ever divided into two sects, Materialists and Idealists...." The idealist insists "on the power of Thought and of Will, on inspiration, on miracle, on individual culture".[2]

In one of his posthumously published notes about Emerson Whitman said that Emerson's idea of God did not correspond to the contemporary scientific way of seeing the world, but rather reminded one of "the old old Oriental idea of God, taken up by the Ecclesiasticism of the middle ages, and still continued by the fossil churches of the present day...".[3]

The idea that all of Whitman is the product of Emerson's influence has gained wide currency in American literary criticism. Indeed, the poet himself remarked that for a long time he could not come to a boil (and was just "simmering") until finally Emerson helped him find himself. It is hard to tell with any degree of certainty how well Whitman was acquainted with Emerson's philosophical works in the years when *Leaves of Grass* first began taking shape. It is clear enough, however, that some of Emerson's ideas and also the stylistic peculiarities of his essays influenced both the poet's foreword to the first edition of *Leaves of Grass* and the poems themselves. But the idealistic philosophical basis of transcendentalism was undoubtedly alien to Whitman.

For Emerson, the poet wrote to one of his correspondents, the "word is mind (or intellect or soul)". Whitman himself found "everything in the *common concrete*, the broadcast materials, the flesh, the common passions, the tangible and visible, etc...".[4] In the same letter the poet said that he had never cared very much for Emerson's writings, but from their first meeting he had loved the man himself and been devoted to him.

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[1] *The Shock of Recognition*, p. 266.

[2] R. W. Emerson, *The Complete Essays and Other Writings*, N. Y., Modern Library, 1940, p. 87.

[3] *Faint Clews & Indirections*, Durham, N. C., Duke University Press, 1949, p. 28.

[4] *The Shock of Recognition*, p. 289.

The First Three Editions of *Leaves of Grass*

In the late fifties Whitman confidently continued to develop his poetic gift. While the first edition of *Leaves of Grass* contained only twelve poems, the second edition (1856) contained twenty new poetic works, and the third (1860), more than a hundred.

The poet went on expanding his book all his life, including new poems and revising many of those already published. He often changed their titles and the order in which they were placed. Whitman grouped his works in cycles, but the contents of these cycles was not fixed. In order to find our way in Whitman's poems, I shall henceforth (with a few exceptions) give them the titles they bore in the last edition brought out during the poet's lifetime.

Leaves of Grass opens with verses which Whitman called "Inscriptions". In them he describes (often aphoristically) his own work and formulates his aims as a poet. The present-day editions of *Leaves of Grass* usually begin with the poem "One's-Self I Sing" (1867). Although it appeared for the first time only after the Civil War, I think it relevant to start a critique of *Leaves of Grass* with this poem, because in this "inscription" the poet expresses most clearly the spirit of the whole book.

One's-Self I sing, a simple separate person,
Yet utter the word Democratic, the word En-Masse.

Of physiology from top to toe I sing,
Not physiognomy alone nor brain alone is worthy for the
Muse, I say the Form complete is worthier far,
The Female equally with the Male I sing.

Of Life immense in passion, pulse, and power,
Cheerful, for freest action form'd under the laws divine,
The Modern Man I sing.

In this work the poet formulates his program, as it were. He sees himself as one who sings the "simple separate person", the individual personality and at the same time the large masses of human beings, the people "En-Masse". At first glance, however, Whitman's poetry seems to contradict this claim. The poem called "Song of Myself" and indeed all the other poems

Whitman wrote before the Civil War, are about "myself" and not about the masses.

Not only does the poet see everything through his own eyes, those of Walt Whitman; not only does he nearly always describe his own personal experiences; he constantly places his own ego in the forefront of his poetry in a defiant and occasionally conceited fashion.

In "Song of Myself", "Song of the Open Road" and "Crossing Brooklyn Ferry", as well as in dozens of other works, the center of attention is Walt Whitman. The reader, as it were, is constantly coming face to face with this concrete individual, is forever in his company, living through his experiences and sharing his interests. Whitman, deliberately naming himself in the poems, tells us his age, speaks of his parents, and lingers over the "smoke" of his "own breath", over his apparently unremarkable "respiration and inspiration".

He says defiantly: "My foothold is tenon'd and mortis'd in granite...", and in the final part of "Song of Myself" he shocks the reader with the declaration, "I sound my barbaric yawp over the roofs of the world."

The middle of the last century was a time of immensely significant social struggles, a time marked by rapid development of human personality: the value of the individual was being asserted. This, in turn, created favorable conditions for the flowering of lyric poetry.

At the same time the specific features of life in the United States encouraged the development of egoism. The Walt Whitman who is constantly in the forefront of *Leaves of Grass* is not simply a personality with strong feelings and bold thoughts, one who has the power to transmit his emotions and ideas to other people. He is not simply a lyrical hero, sure of his right to a place in society. He is a personality vigorously blazing a road for himself in the world, a personality who to a certain extent even wants to make the people around him conform to his will.

There are plenty of critics who take Whitman at his word and are willing (and even anxious) to see the poet as a person who seeks merely to glorify himself, to make *Leaves of Grass* a monument to his own ego. Here is an example. In a recent article a rather well-known American literary historian declared that no other major American author "celebrated himself at such length, with such intensity ... with so great a

sense of his own importance"[1] as did Walt Whitman (and possibly, according to this critic, Thomas Wolfe).

Apparently, then, there is a conflict between the social purpose which the author sets himself in the poem "One's-Self I Sing", and the affirmation (sometimes even flaunting) of the poet's own personality, so typical of his work. This contradiction cannot be resolved simply by saying that the lyrical poet, while expressing what is peculiar to him individually, also reflects facts of a more general nature, that the personal is objectified: in *Leaves of Grass* the poet's personality is far too overbearing to support these conclusions.

Whitman himself — both in his articles and his poems — stubbornly (and quite justly) insisted that his lyrics were not only projections of his own personality, but also reflected the broadest reality possible, that the poet's ego in his work was a true incarnation of humanity as a whole, reflecting the very essence of many people and thus possessing an epic meaning. It is highly significant that Whitman's poetry (his pre-war poetry especially) portrays a hero who is often larger than life, which enables the poet to show the man "En-Masse" in all his *greatness*.

An early draft of the beginning of "Song of Myself" contained the following lines:

> *I am your voice — It was tied in you — In me it begins to talk.*
> *I celebrate myself to celebrate every man and woman alive;*
> *I loosen the tongue that was tied in them,*
> *It begins to talk out of my mouth.*[2]

Let us turn now to the text of "Song of Myself" as it appears in the edition of *Leaves of Grass* "authorized and editorially supervized by his literary executors" (R. Bucke, Th. Harned and H. Traubel). Having begun this poem with the declaration that he is singing himself, the poet immediately adds, "And what I assume, you shall assume." How are we to understand this? Is it not an attempt to confirm Whitman's power over others? No, the point here is quite different. The poet explains: "... For every atom belonging to me as good belongs to you."

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[1] *Seven Modern American Novelists*, Ed. by Van O'Connor. Minneapolis, University of Minnesota Press, 1964, p. 190.

[2] W. Whitman, *Leaves of Grass*, 1928, p. 553.

The fact that Whitman's mature works of the pre-Civil War period (the first three editions of *Leaves of Grass*) are most often lyrical in character, that the central hero of his poems is almost always the poet himself and that these works are very closely linked with each other and seem like continuations of each other, makes the researcher's task extremely difficult. In Whitman's major works there is a great variety of colors and themes but each poem is distinguished by certain constant, often repeated motifs.

Whitman almost completely abandoned the old poetic genres such as the ode and the ballad; nor could one say that his numerous "songs" constitute a new genre. The boundaries between genres are very often blurred in Whitman's work. One of the important characteristics of Whitman's "songs" is the absence of distinct narrative elements. Even his longest poems do not describe the hero's path through life; events do not unfold step by step.

At first glance Whitman's "songs" seem to be made up of almost unrelated lyrical and philosophical sketches, descriptions of the most varied phenomena, autobiographical digressions, ecstatic enumerations, lyrical descriptions of nature, etc. Nevertheless, no matter how interwoven Whitman's major poems and poetical cycles may be, they remain independent works. In each "song" and each cycle one senses the development of a distinct thought. "Song of Myself" reveals the essence of the hero, his philosophical world and his cast of mind. "Song of the Broad-Axe" brings out the utopian aspect of Whitman's writings. "A Song for Occupations" centers on "Workmen and Workwomen", the creators of all material values. One can make somewhat similar remarks also, for instance, about the poems "A Song of Joys", "I Sing the Body Electric".

One of the cycles in *Leaves of Grass*, "Children of Adam", consists largely of love lyrics. It includes "I Sing the Body Electric" and the poems "A Woman Waits For Me" (1856), "Out of the Rolling Ocean the Crowd" (1865), "I Heard You Solemn-Sweet Pipes of the Organ" (1865-66) and others.

The next group of verses, "Calamus", is primarily dedicated to the theme of comradely love. Soon after the Civil War the poet collected a number of poems celebrating the revolutionary struggle of the working people of Europe (most of which had been written before 1861) into a special cycle, "Songs of

Insurrection". In the early editions of *Leaves of Grass* no such cycle existed. In later editions Whitman transferred most of the poems in this cycle into the cycles "By the Roadside" and "Autumn Rivulets".

The last editions of *Leaves of Grass* published during Whitman's lifetime contained several other cycles consisting entirely or almost entirely of works written during the Civil War or later. These include "Drum-Taps", "Memories of President Lincoln", "From Noon to Starry Night", and "Songs of Parting".

The main factor linking together the whole of the poet's varied output and binding it into a coherent whole is, of course, his own personality, a fact which gives rise to several important problems. What are the salient features of Whitman's artistic credo? What is the author's way of looking at the world? What is his central artistic idea? Which motifs and moods are specific to this poet, occurring to a greater or lesser extent in all his works?

Many literary historians have attempted to answer these and similar questions. Quite a few American students of Whitman hold to the view that though Whitman may have sympathized with democratic principles, he was first and foremost a poet of extreme breadth of vision, indiscriminately absorbing the reality around him and even ready to merge with it whatever its character may be.

The basic principle lending unity to the poet's work thus becomes his "curiosity", his desire to incorporate in his poetry as many life phenomena and creations of his own fantasy as possible. This, we are told, is the reason for the many pictures Whitman drew of life in various corners of the United States of America and of other countries, for his long catalogues of people engaged in all sorts of occupation, for his abundant enumerations of facts from the sciences, his constant digressions into the field of philosophy, etc.

There can be no doubt that Whitman most certainly did want to grasp as much of reality as possible, to come to know it in all its diversity. He was interested in the lives of the most varied sections of the population; he was attracted to every part of his native land. But in my opinion there is no validity to the ideas of those specialists who would have us believe that Whitman emerged as a poet with a world view that was panoramic but at the same time coldly indifferent. He gave us

no reason to regard "omnivorousness" as the most important thing about his poetic personality.

References to Whitman's inveterate "passivity", his basic readiness to "swim with the tide" can be found in the work of dozens of writers and are intended to imply that the poet accepted life in America as it was, without argument or resistance.

In his *Walt Whitman Handbook*, Gay Wilson Allen sums up the views of many of his colleagues in directly affirming that "passivity" was "an integral part of Whitman's poetic vision, a source of his inspiration". Further on the critic substantiates his conception philosophically, as it were, by declaring that Whitman's "passivity" was based on "his mystical doctrine of the personality".[1]

There are certain literary historians who are inclined to accentuate not Whitman's "passivity", but the "active" bent of his character, ascribing to the poet a very active affirmation of the virtues of American bourgeois society, and even the institution of slavery. These writers — H. Canby, or L. Clark, for instance — would depict the author of *Leaves of Grass* as a thorough apologist of the ruling classes, eager to celebrate expansionism and the like.

"To Cotton-Field Drudge ... I Lean"

It is not surprising that American authorities on Whitman speak so often of the "puzzles" connected with *Leaves of Grass*. It is essential to untangle these "puzzles", and one of the most important of them, perhaps the key puzzle, is the poet's attitude to slavery in America.

As we have seen, Whitman the journalist was consumed by hatred toward the slave owners on the eve of the Civil War; that is precisely the period when poems that were to comprise the first editions of *Leaves of Grass* were being written. In examining the work of American poets who opposed slavery, many scholars mention (and quite rightly) Whittier, Longfellow, Lowell, Emerson and other less known authors, but they often forget about Walt Whitman.

Of course this does not apply to all critics. Here I would like to say a kind word for Clifton Furness, a modest American

[1] G. W. Allen, *Walt Whitman Handbook*, Chicago, Packard, 1946, p. 355.

scholar who is not widely enough known. All his life he dreamed of writing a book about Whitman, one which would probably have made an important contribution to the study of the poet's life and work, since Furness understood Whitman's passionate democratic convictions very well and valued them very highly. Unfortunately an untimely death prevented him from carrying out his plan.

Furness was the first to publish the text of the pamphlet, "The Eighteenth Presidency". It was he who acquainted the readers with the rich contents of Whitman's lecture notes. Furness also discovered, collected and published a large quantity of other materials which conclusively demonstrate the vigor of Whitman's anti-slavery feelings. A collection of little known or totally unknown papers by Whitman which Furness compiled was published in the United States during his lifetime in a ridiculously small edition — 750 copies; but as a result of Furness' work objective historians of literature can now more readily appreciate how much the poet was preoccupied with the important issues of the day connected with the anti-slavery movement.

The problem of the attitude of Whitman and other American writers to the institution of slavery also plays an important part in any analysis of the conditions giving rise to realistic tendencies in the basically romantic literature of mid-nineteenth century United States.

The creative achievements of the American romantics of the twenties, thirties, forties and fifties of last century are indisputable; these writers recorded with immense expressiveness the painful disharmony between man and dollar, between the dreams of the common people about implementing the principles of equal rights, and the immoral practices of American money-grubbers.

It is the rejection of a world ruled by sheer egoism that was the basis of the artistic achievements of Poe, Hawthorne and Melville, authors of such masterpieces as "The Raven", *The Scarlet Letter* and *Moby Dick*. Some of the romantics creatively presented, in intensely poetic images, an ideal of life which had been desecrated by the prose of everyday existence, an ideal based on communion with eternally beautiful nature, on man's intrinsic goodness and also on a moral code which had disappeared under the pressure of "civilization" or had been preserved only among the "uncivilized". Even before the war

between the North and the South, one of the results of which was the sad transformation of the dream of America's Golden Age into the gloomy reality of the "gilded age", the romantics had felt that a social order which made individualism supreme posed a terrible threat to humanitarian principles.

To a certain degree Whitman adopted the protest of the romantics against the rule of the golden calf. The emotional heat with which these writers expressed their rejection of the injustice in the world found a response in his heart. We shall see later that even before the Civil War the poet was not blind to the social ills reflected in the antagonism of wealth and poverty.

But the contradictions between the bourgeois "upper classes" and the propertyless lower classes, though fundamental, were not the only factor determining American social life in the mid-nineteenth century. At that time the struggle for land and against the slave owners as well as speculators in land, assumed immense significance.

On the eve of the war between the North and the South, the American people were faced with tasks of truly immense historical significance, which demanded tremendous efforts and sacrifices. The interlinked Free Soil and anti-slavery movements, were, of course, highly progressive. In the years when *Leaves of Grass* was being written, it seemed genuinely possible for the democratic elements to gain an important victory over reaction.

The war of 1861-1865 ended in defeat for the South and at least the formal abolition of slavery. At the height of military operations a homestead act was also passed, which millions of Americans had been dreaming about for decades. In the middle years of the last century, the common people of America displayed genuine heroism and greatness of heart.

The hopes that the victory of the capitalist North over the slave-owning South would enable the Americans to solve all the social problems facing the country, were of course quite illusory. Nonetheless, a crushing blow had been delivered to the most retrograde sectors of society.

Not Poe, nor even Hawthorne and Melville, who outlived the author of "The Raven" by many years, were able to reflect in really great artistic images the powerful upsurge of the democratic movement in mid-century or the magnificence of the cause championed by the North.

Below I shall dwell in some detail on Thoreau, who among all the romantics expressed his hatred of slavery most strongly. Now I shall simply note that even Thoreau was unable to comprehend all the contrasts of America with such breadth and to show the potential of the people with such faith as Walt Whitman.

Although many notable figures of abolitionist prose and poetry, such as Whittier, Lowell and Beecher-Stowe learned the artistic use of language from the romantics and were also indebted to them for a great deal of their boldness in the struggle against social evils, it was largely they and other writers who rose on the wave of the anti-slavery movement, who helped to lay the foundations of American realism.

Of course, realistic features were noticeable in the works of some romantics as well: Cooper, with his deep understanding of the historical tragedy of the Indians and the vices of the American businessman, or Hawthorn, who soberly depicted many important traits of life in the early stages of American history.

But it was the striking pictures of the life of the Negro slaves (and of the slave owners), works full of love for the oppressed, which were created in the fifties by the best writers and poets of the abolitionist camp, that marked the turning point in the prevalent artistic method. They testified to the serious changes occurring in American literature, to the internal development of realistic principles.

This is most noticeable in the prose writings of the anti-slavery movement. Although Beecher-Stowe's book *Uncle Tom's Cabin* displays a definite religious bent, which sometimes tends to clash with its realism, it is basically a realistic novel, as was pointed out by the late Soviet scholar A. Elistratova.

A contribution to American realistic literature, which before the Civil War was just finding its feet, was also made by the creators of a crude type of journalistic humor, which gave derisory attention to life in the American backwoods and to the darker aspects of the country's political developments. Yet by far the most important role in the growth of American realism at mid-century was played, in poetry at least, by Walt Whitman.

It is a curious fact that realist literature in the United States just before the Civil War did not emerge against the background of romanticism's demise. On the contrary, some of the American romantics' best works appeared during the

fifties. The dozen years before the war saw the publication of *Uncle Tom's Cabin* and *Moby Dick, The Scarlet Letter* and *Leaves of Grass.* Though these books to a certain extent were antagonistic, as far as the artistic method was concerned, they did in fact complement each other.

Walt Whitman's realism, combined with his undoubted and highly characteristic tendency towards romanticism, found its fullest expression in the poet's largest work, "Song of Myself" (1855).

"Song of Myself" does not deal specifically with slavery and the struggle against slavery, or with the preparations for war (*Leaves of Grass* contains almost no poems completely devoted to the subject of abolition). At the center of "Song of Myself" is the poet himself; nevertheless, the poem has many, many heroes. The apparent contradiction between the lyrical essence of "Song of Myself" and the presence of a great many different characters is resolved in an unusual manner — the poet constantly reincarnates himself into other people; the image of the poet contains many different images.

The country of which "Song of Myself" speaks is the country of slavery and of resistance to the cruel power of the planters. It is quite natural, therefore, that in various parts of his poem Whitman speaks again and again, for various reasons, about the Negroes.

And he speaks of them with profound love for men and women languishing in the great Negro prison, with defiant indignation, with hatred for the oppressors. He does not simply describe the sufferings of the black-skinned pariahs — it is as though the author himself becomes a Negro and a slave.

In one section of "Song of Myself" Whitman describes the torments of a "hounded slave" with great accuracy, rejecting the specifically romantic device of "supercharged" emotions. (Significantly, the section contains almost no epithets.) The poet seems to have restricted himself to a matter of fact registration of events, but what emotional tension, what stormy feelings are hidden in his simple words!

I am the hounded slave, I wince at the bite of the dogs,
Hell and despair are upon me, crack and again crack the marksmen,

I clutch the rails of the fence, my gore dribs, thinn'd
with the ooze of my skin,
I fall on the weeds and stones,
The riders spur their unwilling horses, haul close,
Taunt my dizzy ears and beat me violently over the
head with whip-stocks.

Further on Whitman exclaims:

I do not ask the wounded person how he feels, I myself
become the wounded person....

These words reveal a great truth about the poet. It is precisely his ability to "become" the man he is talking about that is an important source of Whitman's greatness.

Whitman does not regard the Negro with the eyes of an uninvolved though sympathetic onlooker. He takes his hero's load upon his own shoulders. There is truth in the poet's magnificent words:

Whoever degrades another degrades me,
And whatever is done or said returns at last to me.

What the slave experiences we also experience. In this way Whitman makes us see the genuine America of slave labor, where people with black skin are subject to terrible torments. There is no exaggeration here, nothing out of the usual; everything is the way it really is. Man is shown in his true manifestations. And the result is deeply perturbing.

At the base of Whitman's protest against slavery lies the philosophy so dear to the poet and so deeply engrained in his personality: the philosophy of the natural equality of all men. This is the underlying principle in *Leaves of Grass.* That is why in "Song of Myself" the poet turns to common grass as a symbol of general equality:

A child said What is the grass? *fetching it to me with*
full hands,
How could I answer the child? I do not know what it
is any more than he.

Staggered by the mightiness of nature, the poet is unable to give a straight answer to the question "What is the grass?", just

as he cannot say, for example, what the earth is or what the stars are. But of course Whitman knows that grass is a miraculous creation of nature which brings us joy ("tenderly will I use you curling grass"). It is an incarnation of hope ("out of hopeful green stuff woven"). Grass is also proof that life is eternal ("the smallest sprout shows there is really no death").

But most important, grass is a symbol of the equality of all men,

> *I guess it is a uniform hieroglyphic,*
> *And it means, Sprouting alike in broad zones and narrow zones,*
> *Growing among black folks as among white,*
> *Kanuck, Tuckahoe, Congressman, Cuff,*
> *I give them the same,*
> *I receive them the same.*

In declaring that he gives everybody "the same", since the grass grows among both black and white folks, the poet is above all attacking the slavery practices which had been legalized in thousands of acts of legislation and which were stubbornly defended by the government, the church, many newspapers and important public figures.

In his indignation with slavery Whitman, naturally enough, proceeded from the political principles of bourgeois democracy, but the recognition of the Negro's right to freedom was not simply a generalized political idea for the poet; still less was it a conclusion to be drawn from the process of economic development.

The idea that a Negro deserves freedom simply because he is a man is a concretely felt emotion in his poetry, the emotion of passionate, heartfelt humanism. It is not merely that Whitman accepts black men as human beings deserving the same rights as white men; he loves Negroes just as they are in real life.

"Song of Myself" contains the image, palpable to almost all our senses, of an ordinary Negro coachman. In his strong hands he "holds firmly the reins of his four horses". The image contains no romantic exaggeration or sentimentality; the poet seems to speak of something he has just seen. He has noticed the block that "swags underneath on its tied-over chain" as well as the distinctive pose of the Negro, "pois'd on one leg on the string-piece".

But Whitman's poem presents more than a simple genre scene; before the reader there arises the image of a man of really amazing physical and spiritual beauty. The Negro is worthy of our love, worthy of respect; he is "steady and tall", his neck and breast are "ample" and "the sun falls on his crispy hair and mustache, falls on the black of his polish'd and perfect limbs". His glance is "calm and commanding". (Remember, the poet is speaking of a simple black man, a half-slave even in the North.)

He is handsome, this Negro, this black-skinned giant, and Whitman expresses his love for him in an open and vivid manner: "... I do not stop there,/I go with the team also."

According to Whitman's characterization of himself, the "I" in "Song of Myself" is "the caresser of life wherever moving". Everything that happens on earth is dear to him. Nonetheless, it would be wrong to see the principal hero of the poem as merely an observer, "absorbing all to myself and for this song". He is not even simply a man who is fair to everybody, including the despised Negroes. "Walt Whitman", the hero of Whitman's poetry, is ready to do battle to make equality real.

His desire to gather as much of life as possible into his *Leaves of Grass* and simultaneously to express his love for mankind, sometimes leads Whitman to declare that he (that is, both the author and the hero of his poetry) is the "general individual":

> *I am of old and young, of the foolish as much as the wise,*
> *Regardless of others, ever regardful of others....*

This regard for *"others"* is basic to the poet's personality.

In the same poem Whitman calls himself a man who gives voice to the feelings and desires of the humiliated, enslaved and oppressed. That is why Whitman's poetry is literally shot through with anti-slavery motifs.

> *To cotton-field drudge or cleaner of privies I lean,*
> *On his right cheek I put the family kiss,*
> *And in my soul I swear I never will deny him.*

The poet does not confine himself to a passive expression of sympathy for the Negro. In his poem "By Blue Ontario's Shore" (1856), a poetic manifesto, he warns his enemy:

Assassin! then your life or ours be the stake, and
respite no more.

There is no doubt that the assassin whom the poet challenges is the slave owner. In the same poem Whitman condemns slavery as a "murderous, treacherous conspiracy" and calls for resistance to those who wish to "raise" this institution "upon the ruins of all the rest...".

The poet cannot reconcile himself to slave-owning America. The following bitterly sarcastic words were uttered before the war: "... By God I sometimes think this whole land is becoming one vast model plantation thinking itself well off because it has wherewithal to wear and no bother about its pork." [1]

In the years when the beautiful poem about "Blue Ontario" was created, the mass anti-slavery struggle with life itself at stake was still to come; but already there were daily clashes with the slave owners. In "Song of Myself" Whitman describes a man who helps a runaway slave to escape his pursuers.

While the romantics as a rule found the heroic in the unusual, Whitman discovered heroic deeds in the daily activity of the ordinary supporter of abolition. The hero of the following lines — who is both the poet and any one of his praiseworthy fellow-countrymen — has a "fire-clock lean'd in the corner" in case he should be called upon to save the Negro from his pursuers by force of arms:

The runaway slave came to my house and stopt
outside,
I heard his motions crackling the twigs of the
woodpile,
Through the swung half-door of the kitchen I saw him
limpsy and weak,
And went where he sat on a log and led him in and
assured him,
And brought water and fill'd a tub for his sweated
body and bruis'd feet....

This is not a symbolic washing of feet. Whitman is depicting real life. He continues:

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[1] *Whitman's Workshop*, p. 83.

And gave him a room that enter'd from my own, and
gave him some coarse clean clothes,
And remember perfectly well his revolving eyes and
his awkwardness,
And remember putting plasters on the galls of his
neck and ankles....

The verse concludes with the following words, based on the intonations of everyday speech, yet charged with meaning:

He staid with me a week before he was recuperated and
pass'd north,
I had him sit next me at table, my fire-lock lean'd
in the corner.

Thus Whitman sees in his hero not a helpless person, who finds himself out of tune with life, tragically doomed and unable to offer any resistance, but a man of action, armed with faith in the possibility of achieving his aims and possessing the specific means for doing so. Let us recall that in mid-century America there was good reason for the poet to portray his fellow-countrymen in just this way (though victory in the struggle against slavery certainly did not mean, as Whitman sometimes imagined, the liberation of working people from all oppression).

In any case, the realistic method allowed Whitman to give a more concrete and accurate account of American reality than would have been possible in a fully romantic context. A feeling for history, the logic of life itself and especially a keen awareness of the grandeur of the apparently modest activity of the opponents of slavery (later it was trasformed into a war of gigantic proportions)—all these factors underlie the aesthetic principles which attracted Whitman even at the beginning of his artistic development.

Characteristic of Whitman's view of life are the sentiments expressed in one of his notes. He said: "Where others see a slave, a pariah, an emptier of privies, the Poet beholds what, when the days of the soul are accomplished, shall be the peer of God." [1]

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[1] Ibid.

A profound understanding of the fatal role of slavery in the United States and a fervent hatred of that inhuman institution find expression in many other of Whitman's poems. There has been preserved his outline for an abolitionist poem which was to have been called "Poem of the Black Person". Probably those sections of "I Sing the Body Electric" in which "the slave-mart" is described were to have been included in it.

Even in its present form this poem is a powerful hymn to the black man and a condemnation of the southern planters. Whitman sees in the Negro slave a "wonder" of nobility and beauty, the promise of a magnificent future:

This is not only one man, this the father of those who
shall be fathers in their turns,
In him the start of populous states and rich republics,
Of him countless immortal lives with countless embodi-
ments and enjoyments.

How do you know who shall come from the offspring of
his offspring through the centuries?
(Who might you find you have come from yourself, if
you could trace back through the
centuries?)

In "Salut au Monde!" (1856) the poet once again speaks with great respect and tenderness of the "divine-soul'd African", the man who has become a despised slave in his country. This African is "large, fine-headed, nobly-form'd". Greeting the "dim-descended" dark-skinned man, the author of the poem refers to him as "superbly destin'd on equal terms with me!"

In the poem "Respondez!" Whitman relates with great sickness of heart how Negroes live in his country, where the "white person" treads "the black person under his heel". In the poem "Song of the Broad-Axe" the ideal town is depicted as one "where the slave ceases, and the master of slaves ceases". In the poem "The Sleepers" we see the image of a happy future, a world in which there is no longer slavery ("The call of the slave is one with the master's call, and the master salutes, the slave").

In yet another long poem, "Song of the Open Road", Whitman declares equality sublime: "Here the profound lesson of reception, not preference nor denial." The poet

needed these words above all to express his determination not to deny "the black with his woolly head". In the original text of the poem "To a Foil'd European Revolutionaire" (1856) one finds the sarcastic thought that "the instinct of liberty" will only be "discharged" and "the infidel and the tyrant come into possession", when

> *Laws for slaves sweet to the taste of people—*
> *the slave-hunt acknowledged,*
> *You or I walking abroad upon the earth, elated at the*
> *sight of slaves, no matter who they are....*[1]

In the poem "Says" (1860) the poet's attitude towards slavery is expressed even more sharply. He warns that "where liberty draws not the blood out of slavery, there slavery draws the blood out of liberty..." (this poem was written just one year before the commencement of hostilities between the North and the South).

In the mid-fifties the country was shaken by a shameful event: the upper circles of the Boston bourgeoisie agreed to allow agents of slave owners to seize former slaves who lived there and hand them over to their "masters". In "A Boston Ballad", probably written in 1854, Whitman tells how in Boston, with its freedom-loving traditions, the people who fought for American independence could no longer lie peacefully in their graves:

> *Why this is indeed a show—it has called the dead out*
> *of the earth!*
> *The old graveyards of the hills have hurried to see!*
> *Phantoms! phantoms countless by flank and rear!*

The dead are filled with sorrow and anger. The poet asks: "What troubles you Yankee phantoms? what is all this chattering of bare gums?" The freedom fighters of olden times are indignant that their great-grandsons, well dressed and decorous, have allowed the slave owners to take a grip on the North and have betrayed their ancestors.

Just how accurate the poet's characterization was of the attitude of many propertied men towards the institution of

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[1] W. Whitman, *Leaves of Grass*, 1928, p. 670.

slavery is demonstrated by an interesting document published just a few years before the appearance of "A Boston Ballad". In the *New York Daily Tribune* dated November 21, 1850, an article was republished by one John Knight, a Southerner who had gone north to demand the return of several runaway slaves. In the article Knight declares—on the basis of his personal experience—that although abolitionists and Negroes are quite numerous in Boston and at the present time largely control the way things are, nonetheless, the businessmen and in general people with property, display very little interest in this matter and even say that the fugitive slave law should be observed.

In a series of poems composed during the darkest years of the slave-owners' domination in Washington, Whitman expressed his contempt for the "scum floating atop of the waters", for "night-dogs askant in the capital". He goes on to say in the poem "To the States" (its subtitle reads: "To Identify the 16th, 17th, or 18th Presidentiad"):

...With gathering murk, with muttering thunder and
lambent shoots we all duly awake,
South, North, East, West, inland and seaboard, we
will surely awake....

The awakening indeed was not long in coming. From an early variant of the poem published recently (it was apparently written in 1859), it appears that the poem was originally entitled "A Past Presidentiad, and one to come also".[1] At that time the poet had little hope that the forthcoming elections would bring about any significant improvement in the American political situation. But Whitman was mistaken. The nomination of Lincoln for president in 1860 and his subsequent election substantially changed the situation.

Many American poets wrote about the horrors of slavery and the need to fight back, but no voice was so harsh and strong as Whitman's in expressing the feelings of the working people, who condemned the southern planters and were indignant with the traitors in the North, regarding with pride the heroic deeds of the fighters for abolition. The merits of the civic and political poetry of Bryant, Whittier or Longfellow are indisput-

[1] *Whitman's Manuscripts. Leaves of Grass (1860)*, Ed. by F. Bowers, Chicago, University of Chicago Press, 1955, p. 190.

able. But one is astounded by Whitman's simplicity, the natural and expressive language of his verses, the almost total absence in *Leaves of Grass* of traditional poetical elements, of images taken from the Bible, which other American poets were inclined to use extensively.

It is a minor but significant fact, that in several of his early poems Whitman was still addressing freedom by the poetical and biblical form of "thou", while in *Leaves of Grass* he mostly uses the everyday form of "you". Whitman once mentioned in *Specimen Days* that he "had great trouble in leaving out the stock 'poetical' touches, but succeeded at last".

"I Sit And Look Out"

As we have seen, even in his youth the poet was disturbed by the role of the rich in the United States and the deviations from the principles of democracy which were its inevitable consequence. During the years when the struggle for land and against slavery seemed to absorb all his attention, Whitman remained a bitter enemy of those who were "demented with the mania of owning things" and their political agents. It is quite conceivable that now, when he saw slavery in all its monstrosity, he became more sharply aware of all the imperfections permeating political and social life of the country.

Even before the Civil War Whitman's writing evidenced an ever increasing awareness that slavery was not the only form of social oppression affecting the United States. Remember those gloomy generalizations in "The Eighteenth Presidency" and in Whitman's "lecture" notes. There were tones of sadness and condemnation in his poetry as well, that were not always engendered (or, at least, not directly engendered) by the existence of slavery, but rather by the domination of property owners in general.

In one remark discovered in the poet's early notebooks he expresses his feelings and attitudes with particular clarity. "Amid ... the universal accessibility of riches and personal comforts," he writes, "—the wonderful inventions—the cheap swift travel" the country "seems to be threatened with a sort of ossification of the spirit." Everywhere disillusionment in high ideals had taken the upper hand; smug complacency was everywhere. "The public countenance ... is cadaverous as a

corpse." "...I do not believe the people of these days are happy,"[1] he concludes.

Whitman was to elaborate on these thoughts after the Civil War, at a new stage in American history, when the contradictions between labor and capital would come to the forefront in the country. Towards the end of his life, after much spiritual suffering, the great American critical realist Mark Twain came to very similar conclusions about bourgeois society. The same ideas would form the basis for the best works of Theodore Dreiser, Sinclair Lewis, Ernest Hemingway, Scott Fitzgerald and other great American prose writers and poets of the twentieth century.

In the middle of the last century Walt Whitman naturally had no clear concept of proletarian ideas, and by no means understood the role the working class was to play in the social life of his country. Like most of his fellow-countrymen, he still hoped that after the defeat of the planters a sort of abstract democracy would help bring prosperity and happiness to all Americans.

Nonetheless, the poet was a democrat, and not a bourgeois liberal. Whitman expected democracy to do incomparably more than the most "seditious" of the Democrats and the most militant leaders of the Republicans would be content with. This allowed him to show in poems written as early as the fifties, that in the United States life was bad not just for the Negroes. "Song of Myself", for instance, contains the image of "many sweating, ploughing, trashing, and then the chaff for payment receiving", contrasted to "a few idly owning, and they the wheat continually claiming". One of Whitman's unfinished poems expresses the idea of the cheated "many" who feed the rich idlers, in even more clearly defined images.

The poet sees "a smoucher grabbing the good dishes exclusively to himself and grinning at the starvation of others as if it were funny". He speaks with hatred of the grunting greedy hogs. They mock the poor, and when the latter "awkwardly come for their slices" they are met with "angry hysterics".

It is quite likely that the poem "Respondez!" was written at the same time as "The Eighteenth Presidency". It first appeared in the 1856 edition of *Leaves of Grass* and during the

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[1] *The Uncollected Poetry and Prose of Walt Whitman*, Vol. II, p. 90.

next few years was reprinted several times. "Respondez!" is a satire, full of biting Swiftian irony. Whitman pretends to be pleased by facts which actually revolt and horrify him. The object of his condemnation is the same as in the "Eighteenth Presidency", but "Respondez!" is free of the ideological weaknesses of the pamphlet. The author no longer gives assurances that he is ready to obey extant laws, even if they serve the interests of the slave owners. Artistic logic here forces Whitman the poet to express himself more decisively than he had done as a publicist.

Whitman thinks that his country has been "smother'd in thievery, impotence, shamelessness, mountain high". He proposes sarcastically:

Let faces and theories be turn'd inside out!
let meanings be freely criminal,
as well as results!
Let there be no suggestion above the suggestion of
drudgery!

The central idea of this bitter poem is expressed in the ironical call:

Let the crust of hell be neared and trod on! let
the days be darker than the nights! let
slumber bring less slumber than waking
time brings!...
Let freedom prove no man's inalienable right! every one
who can tyrannize, let him tyrannize to
his satisfaction!

In the poem "I Sit And Look Out" the poet speaks of "the sorrows of the world", "the secret convulsive sobs", the "oppression and shame":

I see the workings of battle, pestilence, tyranny,
I see martyrs and prisoners...
I observe the slights and degradations cast by arrogant
persons upon laborers, the poor,
and upon negroes, and the like....

It is significant that Whitman links laborers and Negroes; they have a common fate. The poet is clearly aware of the

differences and contradictions between those who own the wealth, the "arrogant persons", and the working people of both North and South, who are condemned to poverty.

"O the Farmer's Joys!"

The poet often contrasted the gloomy aspects of life in America with the ideal of a pioneering farmer in the West, struggling for a democratic resolution to the problem of "free soil".

Whitman's far-sightedness is demonstrated, for example, in the fact that he (in contrast, say, to Whittier) did not affirm the general superiority of the farmer over the city dweller, for he loved the town worker, the craftsman and laborer, as well.

During the Civil War, the passionate response of thousands and thousands of townsmen to the call to take up arms against the South even inspired the poet to champion the city. Still, in *Leaves of Grass*, there are many songs in praise of the farmer and his way of life. The following lines, for instance, were included in "A Song of Joys":

O the farmer's joys!...
To rise at peep of day and pass forth nimbly to work,
To plough land in the fall for winter-sown crops,
To plough land in the spring for maize,
To train orchards, to graft the trees, to gather apples in the fall.

In almost all his major poems Whitman salutes the people who work the land, the fields and pastures, the wild spaces of the prairies and the forests.

One of Whitman's most ecstatic hymns is "Pioneers! O Pioneers!" (1865), in which he sings of the bold and brave men who "must bear the brunt of danger". It is quite clear that for Whitman "pioneers" above all mean "Western youths", the farmers of Colorado, Nebraska and Missouri. But the word "Pioneers" also has wider implications. The poet sees now men, bold and vigorous, making their way into the future:

We primeval forests felling,
We the rivers stemming, vexing we and piercing deep the mines within.
We the surface broad surveying, we the virgin soil upheaving,
Pioneers! O pioneers!

There is no doubt that Whitman's conception of the activities of the American pioneers is somewhat idyllic. He says nothing of the terrible conditions of hundreds of thousands of Americans working the virgin land or prospecting for gold and silver in the West.

Whitman was inclined to romanticize the life of Americans settling the western lands. Nonetheless, the poem about "pioneers", with its universal, even cosmic generalizations ("the brother orbs ... all the clustering suns and planets"), is not merely an exercise in fantasy. It reflects the actual activities of men who were clearing the land in the remotest corners of America, setting up new farms, expanding industry, increasing the wealth of the country.

Whitman praised his countrymen's achievements in building up their material culture without mentioning the price of such achievements, forgetting who in the United States were the final recipients of the sweat- and blood-soaked fruits of the titanic labor of the "pioneers". When we read "Pioneers! O Pioneers!" today we respond largely to the general content of the poem. We feel the disturbing beauty implicit in this romantic celebration of man's creative activity, his bold advances, despite all obstacles, along the path of progress.

"Welcome This Storm"

One very attractive feature of *Leaves of Grass* is that for Whitman the tragic nature of much of real life never resolves into black pessimism. This was possible because the poet was constantly burning with desire for action, for struggle and resistance, because he always had the heart of a fighter. In the United States there were already a great many people who, while swearing loyalty to the revolutionary ideals of their forefathers, vehemently disapproved of contemporary revolutionary movements. But the stormy songs of liberty which reached America from revolutionary France and other European countries struck a responsive chord in the heart of the poet, who since his youth had deeply revered the traditions of the War of Independence.

Having greeted in "Europe" the revolutionary victory of the French people, which, alas, proved short-lived, Whitman once again turns to this theme in the poem "To a Foil'd European Revolutionaire" (1856), bitterly relating how after the defeat of the revolution "the prison, scaffold, garrote, handcuffs, iron necklace and lead-balls do their work...". This poem is a requiem for the fallen:

Did we think victory great?
So it is — but now it seems to me, when it cannot be help'd,
that defeat is great,
And that death and dismay are great.

As always, however, the poet urges people to continue the struggle, expressing his conviction that they will finally be victorious. He believes, as before, that liberty cannot be "quell'd by one or two failures, or any number of failures...". He says of himself:

I am the sworn poet of every dauntless rebel
the world over....

A few years later the author of "Europe" returned to the theme of revolution in the poem "France" (1860), sub-titled, "The 18th Year of These States". Looking back on the events of the great French Revolution, he continues the noble tradition of Philip Freneau.

At the end of the eighteenth century, Freneau, the first great poet of the new republic, saluted the Revolution in a poem dedicated to the anniversary of the fall of the Bastille. Revolution returned to France what had been seized by the kings and priests. For his part, Whitman represents liberty as "the divine infant" awakened by the events of the revolutionary years, by the "roar of cannon, curses, shouts, crash of fallen buildings". And the poet understands the necessity of revolutionary action — he, says the author, "was not so desperate at the battues of death — was not so shock'd at the repeated fusillades of the guns".

Whitman concludes the poem with these exalted lines:

O I hear already the bustle of instruments, they will soon
be drowning all that would interrupt them,
O I think the east wind brings a triumphal and free march,
It reaches hither, it swells me to joyful madness,
I will run transpose it in words, to justify it,
I will yet sing a song for you ma femme.

The poet is referring to events in Europe at the end of the previous century; but in turning to what happened before his own birth and calling upon the French to play once again "a triumphal and free march", he is by no means ready to draw a complacent picture of his own country as one which has realized all man's hopes. Whitman speaks of the revolutionary tasks still facing all countries, including America:

O Liberty! O mate for me!
Here too the blaze, the grape-shot and the axe, in
reserve, to fetch them out in case of need,
Here too, though long represt, can never be destroy'd,
Here too could rise at last murdering and ecstatic,
Here too demanding full arrears of vengeance.

Motifs of rebellion occur in most of the important poems in *Leaves of Grass.* In "Song of Myself", for example, the poet exclaims:

Not a mutineer walks handcuff'd to jail but I am
handcuff'd to him and walk by his side....

We read the following militant lines in his "Song of the Open Road":

My call is the call of battle, I nourish active rebellion,
He going with me must go well arm'd,
He going with me goes often with spare diet, poverty,
angry enemies, desertions.

In "Song of the Broad-Axe" Whitman speaks with respect of "those who in any land have died for the good cause...". ("The seed is spare, nevertheless the crop shall never run out....") He sings the praises of the "defiant deed", "the clear sunsets of the martyrs". Even "A Song of Joys" contains intimations of rebellion. The poet asserts the joy of majestic courage, and tells his contemporary:

O to struggle against great odds, to meet enemies
undaunted!
To be entirely alone with them, to find how much one
can stand!
To look strife, torture, prison, popular odium,
face to face!
To mount the scaffold, to advance to the muzzles of
guns with perfect nonchalance!
To be indeed a God!

In the short poem "To a Certain Cantatrice" (1860) the poet expresses his love for "some brave confronter of despots, some daring rebel", for those who "serve the good old cause, the great idea", i.e., the cause and the idea of "progress and freedom".

In a collection of Whitman's papers published many years after the poet's death, Furness includes the text of the poem "Ship of Libertad", which is not in *Leaves of Grass* and has been given little attention by the poet's biographers. Even in its unfinished form the poem has literary merit. "Ship of Libertad" is a mighty hymn in honor of revolutionary struggle. The most important image in the poem is that of the ship of liberty making its way through the storm. This is the "ship of Humanity — Ship of the ages", which embodies the hopes of the whole world. "Welcome the storm — welcome the trial,"[1] declares the poet.

In the preface to the first edition of *Leaves of Grass*, Whitman wrote that "the attitude of great poets is to cheer up slaves and horrify despots". And while the American romantics did not set themselves concrete social tasks, Whitman was aware of such tasks. In America the abolitionists, fighters for democracy and, among others, the "wander-speakers" were devoting their lives to very concrete aims.

It is perfectly natural that the poet's mature verse should retain some of the oratorical quality of his poetry of 1850s. Often this quality is even more clearly felt. Several literary historians have written about the relation of Whitman's poetry to the art of oratory.

In actual fact Whitman disapproved of most contemporary bourgeois political figures and was ironical about their oratorical style. In the notes for his "lectures", the poet condemned the characteristic ephemeral readiness, "hurried gabble", the surface animation of "the usual American speeches, lectures, etc".[2] Whitman demanded speeches abrupt, sometimes crackling, with strong contrasts, speeches of much breadth, much precision, much indescribable meaning.

According to the poet's notes, the orator becomes a different person when he steps onto the platform. "Suddenly the countenance illumined the breast expanded the nostrils and mouth electric and quivering...— a God stands before you...."[3]

This orator was no self-seeking demagogue, no fashionable priest or lawyer, no idle amuser of the public. He was of the same flesh as the people, a warrior battling for democratic principles. He was a man whose words touch men's hearts.

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[1] *Whitman's Workshop*, p. 84.
[2] Ibid., p. 211.
[3] Ibid.

Many rank-and-file abolitionists were orators who travelled about the country, fearlessly denouncing slavery and other social evils. Whitman's attitude towards them can be seen from a note discovered among his papers, dated 1857, which says that the "wander-speaker" is "the greatest champion America ever could know, yet holding no office or emolument whatever".[1]

It was clear to Whitman that orators who genuinely expressed the ideas of the common people were scarcely greeted with unadulterated rapture. According to him the orator and his listeners are in "an agonistic arena", where the former "suffers, sweats, undergoes his great toil and extasy. Perhaps," continued Whitman, "it is a greater battle than any fought by contending forces on land and sea."[2]

Whitman expressed his deep respect for the tasks facing a real tribune of the people, and wished to serve such an orator's cause in his own poetry. Whitman began to use new poetical forms, not irrespective of his social sympathies or in opposition to them, as some scholars would make us believe, but precisely because his whole being came to be possessed by progressive sympathies and interests.

The intent of Whitman's poetry is to arouse the reader to action. It is of some interest that the words "orator" and "singer" (i.e., the poet) are sometimes used synonymously in *Leaves of Grass*. In the poem "Long I Thought That Knowledge..." the poet expresses his desire to be the "orator" of his native land, the author of "songs of the New World", whose "life must be spent in singing".

This probably explains one of the most characteristic features of Whitman's poetry: each line of his verse is, as a rule, a more or less complete unit of meaning.

Enjambment is almost completely alien to Whitman. Like many orators, Whitman persistently and fervently attempts to bring home certain ideas to his reader. To this end he makes use of syntactical parallels and sharp contrasts, posing questions and giving answers and making the end lines of a stanza particularly meaningful and decisive. In Whitman's civic poetry almost every single line is a pointed and striking call. Here, for instance, are a few lines from the poem "To a Foil'd European Revolutionaire":

> *Courage yet, my brother or my sister!*
> *Keep on — Liberty is to be subserv'd whatever occurs;*

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[1] G. W. Allen, *Walt Whitman Handbook*, pp. 352-53.

[2] *Whitman's Workshop*, p. 37.

That is nothing that is quell'd by one or two failures,
or any number of failures,
Or by the indifference or ingratitude of the people,
or by any unfaithfulness,
Or the show of the tushes of power, soldiers, cannon,
penal statutes.

The poet holds a conversation, as it were, with the revolutionary, who is in despair at the failure of the revolutions of 1848. He is deeply disturbed by the sufferings, the want and enslavement of the defeated. But this poem is not dominated by grief or a sense of resignation. Whitman is full of faith in the final victory of the revolutionary cause. This idea, decked in the strongest emotional tones, resounds through every line of the poem.

This is typical not only of Whitman's civic verse, but of almost all of his poetry.

The author of *Leaves of Grass* felt that he had to address his audience in the most direct possible way ("Camerado, this is no book,/Who touches this touches a man.")

In his "Song of the Open Road" the poet exclaims:

Allons! whoever you are come travel with me!
Traveling with me you find what never tires.

The earth never tires,
The earth is rude, silent, incomprehensible at first,
Nature is rude and incomprehensible at first,
Be not discouraged, keep on....

Time and again Whitman returns to the question and answer form. Attempting to demonstrate, in "Song of the Broad-Axe", that the greatness of human society is determined not by the amount of wealth it has accumulated, but by the degree to which its people are free from oppression, the extent to which spiritual culture has developed, the poet asks:

What do you think endures?
Do you think a great city endures?
Or a teeming manufacturing state?
or a prepared constitution?
or the best built steamships?
Or hotels of granite and iron? or any chef-d'œuvres of
engineering, forts, armaments?

And Whitman's answer, "Away! These are not to be cherish'd for themselves,/ They fill their hour..." serves as an introduction to his description of the ideal "great city".

"What think you I take my pen in hand?" asks Whitman in a poem of the same title (1860).

We learn that the poet's intention is to sing of the beautiful friendship of "two simple men".

It is precisely the active and militant character of Whitman's work which accounts for his tendency to accentuate the concluding lines. Thus, in the poem "Poets to Come" (1860) the final line has the ring of a slogan. Addressing the poets who will come after him, Whitman says that he is "expecting the main things from you".

The poem "Ah Poverties, Wincings, and Sulky Retreats" (1865-66), in which the poet recounts his struggle with "foes that in conflict have overcome me", the foes of poverty, smarts and degradations, concludes with the mighty prophecy that the poet's "real self"

... Shall yet march forth o'ermastering, till all lies
beneath me,
It shall yet stand up the soldier of ultimate victory.

The poem "For You O Democracy" (1860) concludes with a generalized image of democracy as the poet's wife:

For you these from me, O Democracy, to serve you
ma femme!
For you, for you I'm trilling these songs.

It is interesting to compare Whitman's poetry with some of the better examples of American oratorical prose of the mid-nineteenth century. In the United States the art of oratory found brilliant expression in the famous words of William Garrison expressing the determination of the abolitionists to make no compromises with the slave owners. Challenging the plantation owners, Garrison concludes his tirade in this fashion: "I will not equivocate — I will not excuse — I will not retreat a single inch — *AND I WILL BE HEARD.*" [1]

Garrison's prose breathes irreconcilability with social evil; it is full of images and imbued with exalted poetic feeling. In Whitman's political lyrics — and not only in political ones — something similar can be felt.

Let us see, however, what Garrison was like as a poet — he introduced his own verses into his articles.

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[1] *The Democratic Spirit*, p. 253.

Garrison's prose, for all its poetical quality, is distinguished by simplicity of language and imagery drawn from everyday life. This prose testifies to the power of the great abolitionist's imagination. Thus, when he mocks those who call for a "moderate" response to the question of slavery, Garrison ironically suggests that they "moderately" rescue their wives "from the hands of the ravisher" and advises the mother whose babe has fallen into the fire to "gradually" extricate him from the flames. In his poetry, however, Garrison uses quite a different language, one deliberately "poetical", which employs banal images and phrases typical for the mediocre poets of his time. For example, Garrison's poetry contains expressions such as "cruel eye and cloudy brow", "soul-withering glance", "slavish knees that at thy footstool bow", "life-blood warms my throbbing veins",[1] and so on.

In *Leaves of Grass* one can find lines, stanzas and whole poems which are dry, unexpressive, devoid of living color, and full of empty rhetoric. Some of the poet's verses are boring and genuinely prosaic. But Whitman's best works are deeply moving. One rarely finds in his poetry "poetical" images or expressions and turns of phrase which have become trite and stilted. Even Whitman's civic poetry is distinguished for its music and its wealth of fresh, living, colorful images which are truly memorable. The seething revolutionary stream which erupts in Whitman's work largely accounts for the emotional saturation of his poetry.

Whitman, however, was not merely a tribune; an oratorical manner is only one of the many facets of his poetry.

"... A Few Carols ... I Leave for Comrades and Lovers"

It was not political passion alone, of course, that made Whitman a poet. But when the mighty emancipatory movement opened Whitman's eyes to the magnificence of the people's cause, penetrating the depths of his soul, the poet's dormant poetic powers were awakened. Reality appeared to Whitman in all its diversity. The poet's maturity found expression, first and foremost, in his poems of indignation and struggle. But the eventful years before the Civil War also awakened Whitman's remarkable poetic talent in all its other manifestations and aspects.

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[1] *The Democratic Spirit*, pp. 252-53.

He now saw things in a different light—man, his work, friendship, love, nature—the whole immensity of life flowed into his poetry like a spring torrent. Whitman eulogizes the magnificent human body, genuine love, heartfelt comradeship, the glorious summer sky. When meditating on life and death, the future of man or the grandeur of science, Whitman reveals sides of reality and facets of his talent which are not so apparent in him as the poet of the American or French revolutionary cause. Still it was the grandeur of the social struggle that opened his eyes to life in all its blinding brilliance.

The poet, of course, had always been able to love people passionately and gently, but the mighty wind of history was needed to fan the sparks of humanism into a blazing fire.

We know that Whitman's world-view had a strong, even militantly individualistic cast. In "Song of Myself" he said, for instance:

> *Apart from the pulling and hauling stands what I am,*
> *Stands amused, complacent, compassionating, idle,*
> *unitary....*

This is an important aspect of Whitman's many-faceted poetic ego. Nevertheless when we look more closely at Whitman's poems we discover in them an affirmation of the interdependence of people, of the spirit of friendship and solidarity, rather than an attempt to stand apart from "the pulling and hauling" of life, to parade one's individualism and indifference to "battles" and "the fitful events". The most important feature of the poet as revealed in *Leaves of Grass* is his ability to trust people, to appreciate them and to help them. Whitman's great goodness of heart allowed him to echo loudly the most beautiful music known to mankind, the music of brotherhood, the call to collectivism.

The great principle of mutual comradely aid, of workingmen's unity and brotherly love is expressed in Whitman's poetry with immense artistic force. In "Song of Myself" we read: "The press of my foot to the earth springs a hundred affections...", and further on:

> *Adorning myself to bestow myself on the first that*
> *will take me,*
> *Not asking the sky to come down to my good will,*
> *Scattering it freely forever.*

Whitman indeed "freely scatters" his lavish love. In "Song of the Open Road" he addresses the reader with the following words:

Camerado, I give you my hand!
I give you my love more precious than money,
I give you myself....

Leaves of Grass contains works in which a utopian ideal is embodied in generalized images and philosophical utterances. But those poems which describe the personal love of people for each other, as in the lines just quoted or in the following stanza from the poem "To You" (1856) are especially moving:

Whoever you are, now I place my hand upon you, that
you be my poem,
I whisper with my lips close to your ear,
I have loved many women and men, but I love none
better than you.

In the famous fifth part of "Song of Myself", which has been subject to an inordinate amount of criticism, Whitman is basically telling us how his love for a woman has made him feel the majesty of man's love for Man. The poem simultaneously describes the passion of the lyrical hero for his beloved and the poet's affection for all mankind:

I mind how once we lay such a transparent
summer morning,
How you settled your head athwart my hips and
gently turn'd over upon me,
And parted the shirt from my bosom-bone, and
plunged your tongue to my bare-stript
heart,
And reach'd till you felt my beard, and reach'd till
you held my feet.

Swiftly arose and spread around me the peace and
knowledge that pass all the argument
of the earth,
And I know that the hand of God is the promise of
my own,
And I know that the spirit of God is the brother of
my own,
And that all the men ever born are also my brothers,
and the women my sisters and lovers,
And that a kelson of the creation is love....

Whitman sings of the joys of human love and friendship in dozens of poems. The coming of a friend is worth more than glory and success, he says in the poem "When I Heard at the Close of the Day" (1860): "When I carous'd, or when my plans were accomplish'd, still I was not happy," he writes. But when "my dear friend my lover was on his way coming, O then I was happy."

In one poem after another Whitman offers his friendship to any human being he meets. What genuine warmth there is in such words ("To You", 1860):

STRANGER, if you passing meet me and desire to speak
to me, why should you not speak to me?
And why should I not speak to you?

In a longer poem also entitled "To You" (1856) Whitman addresses a passer-by:

I will leave all and come and make the hymns of
you,
None has understood you, but I understand you,
None has done justice to you, you have not done
justice to yourself,
None but has found you imperfect, I only find no
imperfection in you,
None but would subordinate you, I only am he who
will never consent to subordinate
you....

Later in the poem the real meaning of the dedication "To You" is made still clearer. In affirming the worthiness and nobility of all decent people, Whitman is prepared to paint a nimbus of gold-colored light around any man who is really a man "En-Masse":

Painters have painted their swarming groups and
the centre-figure of all,
From the head of the centre-figure spreading a nimbus
of gold-color'd light,
But I paint myriads of heads, but paint no head without
its nimbus of gold-color'd light....

The theme of the unity of all people and the poet's insistent affirmation of his sympathy and love for man run through practically all of Whitman's work. For instance, in "Song of the Open Road" the poet says:

Why are there men and women that while they are nigh
me the sunlight expands my blood?
Why when they leave me do my pennants of joy sink
flat and lank?...
What is it I interchange so suddenly with strangers?
What with some driver as I ride on the seat by his
side?
What with some fisherman drawing his seine by the
shore as I walk by and pause?
What gives me to be free to a woman's and man's good-
will? what gives them to be free to
mine?

In the poem "To a Stranger" (1860) Whitman once again addresses a passer-by:

Passing stranger! you do not know how longingly I
look upon you,
You must be he I was seeking, or she I was seeking....

In greeting the "stranger" the poet is not merely trying to cheer those who are in need of comfort. His intention is to help the common man to straighten his shoulders, to instil self-confidence in him.

Leaves of Grass includes a whole cycle of poems, "Calamus", dedicated to the theme of manly friendship and "robust love". When he explained the meaning of this cycle, the poet emphasized that such poems had first of all a political significance. Whitman's dream of a society bound together in comradeship is disclosed in a number of works in a very frankly publicistic manner.

Whitman is echoing utopian-socialist ideas in the image of "the new city of Friends" ("I Dream'd in a Dream", 1860):

I DREAM'D in a dream I saw a city invincible to the attacks
of the whole of the rest of the earth,
I dream'd that was the new city of Friends,
Nothing was greater there than the quality of robust
love, it led the rest,
It was seen every hour in the actions of the men of
that city,
And in all their looks and words.

This small masterpiece by Whitman was underlined in pencil in the copy of *Leaves of Grass* (in English) found in Lev Tolstoy's library.

In the poem "So Long" (1860) we see the emerging vision of a world of "natural persons", "justice triumphant", "uncompromising liberty and equality". This is a utopian world of "beautiful, gigantic, sweet-blooded" youth and "splendid" old men, and also a world of friendship and "adhesiveness".

The social meaning of the "city of friends" is even more generalized in the "Song of the Broad-Axe":

The place where a great city stands is not the place
of stretch'd wharves, docks, manufactures, deposits of produce merely....
Nor the place of the tallest and costliest buildings
or shops selling goods from the rest
of the earth,
Nor the place of the best libraries and schools, nor
the place where money is plentiest....

If it is not the successes of material culture which determine the real greatness of a city and the people living in it, what is a really great city? It is a city in which human beings are not oppressed, in which there is no inequality and no despotism. In "a great city" "speculations on the soul are encouraged"; "the citizen is always the head and ideal", "the men and women think lightly of the laws". And the summit and crown of it all is people, united by love and friendship.

Where the city of the faithfulest friends stands,
Where the city of the cleanliness of the sexes stands,
Where the city of the healthiest fathers stands,
Where the city of the best-bodied mothers stands,
There the great city stands.

The poet condemns self-interest. His beautiful visions of a happy society are based on comradeship and solidarity. Whitman is inspired to sing:

I will make divine magnetic lands,
With the love of comrades
With the life-long love of comrades....

I will make inseparable cities with their arms about
each other's necks,
By the love of comrades,
By the manly love of comrades....

One could cite countless lines from *Leaves of Grass* that contain images, visions and ideas confirming that the ideal of the brotherhood of man, of manly love is paramount to the poet. He insists that when radiating friendship he receives friendship in return. He dreams that all people should come to love and respect each other.

In the poem "These I Singing in Spring" (1860) we read:

THESE I singing in spring collect for lovers,
(For who but I should understand lovers and all their sorrow and joy?
And who but I should be the poet of comrades?)

In the poem "The Base of All Metaphysics" (1871) the poet says that the meaning of all philosophical systems, their very essence is

The dear love of man for his comrade, the attraction of friend to friend,
Of the well-married husband and wife, of children and parents,
Of city for city and land for land.

In the poem "Gods" (1870) the ideal man is characterized as "my God". This man is "Lover divine and perfect Comrade". He is

... fair, able, beautiful, content, and loving,
Complete in body and dilate in spirit....

It is true that in the poem "Starting from Paumanok" the poet says, "I will effuse egotism", and promises to make "the poem of evil also", but for the most part he glorifies "companionship", the "ideal of manly love". The poem ends with these characteristic lines:

O camerado close! O you and me at last, and us two only....
O something ecstatic and undemonstrable! O music wild!
O now I triumph — and you shall also;
O hand in hand — O wholesome pleasure — O one more desirer and lover!
O to haste firm holding — to haste, haste on with me.

Bourgeois literary criticism desputes the principle of collectivism in Whitman's works. Time and again the poet has been

characterized as the eternal individualist, the incarnation of indestructible vanity and egoism. Every line in *Leaves of Grass* speaking about love and comradeship is dismissed as affectation, proof of the poet's pathological sexual interests, or, at best, the expression of the pitiful naivety of a man entangled in the web of old-fashioned sentimentality.

Actually, the enchantment of *Leaves of Grass* derives to a large extent from the fact that in a country where selfishness reigned supreme, the poet set himself the task (as he said in the preface to the 1876 edition of *Leaves of Grass*), "to arouse and set flowing in men's and women's hearts, young and old, (my present and future readers) endless streams of living, pulsating love and friendship, directly from them to myself, now and ever".[1]

The author of *Leaves of Grass* did not portray men and women as mere embodiments of abstract noble qualities. He saluted people who were like himself, "turbulent, fleshy, sensual, eating, drinking and breeding". In ordinary men, alive and warm, absolutely real, not truncated or distilled, full of strength and yearning for joy, he found spiritual wealth, an ocean of love. The poet believed that people could feel inexhaustible sympathy for others.

It is significant that for the author of "Song of the Broad-Axe", the "city of the faithfulest friends" and man's love for man were not simply features of the better world he dreamed of, but also of a world to be *fought for*. The road leading to this future world was the road of stubborn conflict, the way of the "Ship of Libertad".

Walt Whitman's depictions of a joyful, full-blooded life based on the unity of equal and free individuals were an expression of his active protest against social injustice.

Whitman's poetry emerged at a time which is sometimes called the era of "the utopian experiment" in America. During the decades immediately preceding the Civil War dozens of Fourierist colonies were set up in the country. The popularity of utopian socialism was characteristic of the early, undeveloped stage of class struggle in the United States. This, too, found reflection in Whitman's poetry about "manly love" and a more justly organized society.

Remember that the poet who was proud to leave behind "a few carols vibrating through the air ... for comrades and lovers" was not simply a democrat and a humanist. He was a revolutionary.

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[1] W. Whitman, *Leaves of Grass*, 1928, p. 518.

Utopian ideals, of course, underlie the romantic tendencies of *Leaves of Grass*. But one should not forget that Whitman's poetry about "adhesiveness" breathes the spirit of the street, where the very real interests of people clashed and political passions ran high. The poet's latent attraction to utopian socialist ideals came to a head precisely because on the eve of the Civil War he saw in the American people the potentialities for great heroism, because his faith in man was affirmed by reality. While the work of the American romantics echoed utopian ideas but weakly (relating them largely to a somewhat idyllic conception of the patriarchal past), in *Leaves of Grass* these ideas found a much more vivid expression.

Whitman was a revolutionary democrat, for he was the poet of the revolutionary struggle against the slave owners, both before and during the Civil War. The poet also regarded the revolutionary liberation struggle in Europe from the point of view of a democrat. Utopian socialist ideas were likewise a part of his world outlook. When he spoke about the struggle against the slave owners, about people's longing for solidarity and brotherhood, as well as about the beauty and grandeur of the ordinary man, Whitman's eyes were wide open and keen.

A Few Polemical Remarks

In a review of the first (Russian) edition of this book, published in the June, 1967 issue of the Detroit quarterly *Walt Whitman Review*, the American critic Frank J. Corliss Jr. spoke not only on his own behalf, but, as it were, on behalf of all his American colleagues, when he expressed his disagreement with the thesis that in Whitman's work one is aware of a powerful collective principle. "This point alone," declares the reviewer, "typifies the probably unreconcilable difference in emphases of the Soviet and usual American approaches to Whitman...." [1]

For Corliss, as for many other American students of Whitman, the idea that Whitman, in Gorky's words, called on people "to merge with mankind", seems absurd. For these critics the American poet is an individualist and nothing but an individualist.

In my opinion, the concept suggested by Gorky and Lunacharsky as to what is *most important* in *Leaves of Grass*, is

[1] *Walt Whitman Review*, 1967, June, p. 66.

much closer to the truth than the view of Whitman as a singer asserting his total alienation from other people, his extreme individualism.

At the same time it must be noted that those who emphasize the significance of collectivist strivings in *Leaves of Grass* do not close their eyes to Whitman's individualistic tendencies. In his article "The Destruction of the Personality", Gorky does not describe the poet as a conscious and convinced champion of socialist principles, nor as a consistent "collectivist". Gorky includes the author of *Leaves of Grass* among those writers who started from "individualism and quietism", but later tended towards collectivist views.

Gorky was writing about those authors who "are beginning to recognize the danger" of individualism and understand the joyless position of "the modern man who is isolated and seeks isolation". He stresses in the article "The Destruction of the Personality" that "the more sensitive hearts and sharper minds of the present day ... all indicate the way to the fountain-head of living strength which is capable of reviving and strengthening an exhausted man." [1]

Gorky placed Whitman's name at the head of the list of writers who travelled the road from individualism to socialism (he spoke in addition of Emile Verhaeren, H. G. Wells and Anatole France). It is exremely significant that alongside Walt Whitman Gorky mentions Horace Traubel. In his old age Whitman became very friendly with the young poet, who took detailed notes of his conversations with the author of *Leaves of Grass*. As a man of socialist convictions, Traubel regarded sympathetically the collectivist tendencies of his older comrade.

As far as poetic talent is concerned, of course, there can be no comparison between Traubel and Whitman, but Gorky was very astute in sensing that Traubel's way of thinking was in many ways close to that of the great American poet.

In his article "Whitman and Democracy", Anatoly Lunacharsky does not describe the evolution of the poet's views on society. He concentrates on what, in his opinion, is the most important and valuable aspect of Whitman's world outlook. The outstanding Marxist critic clearly understood that Whitman's ideals went far beyond those implied by scholars when they call Whitman a "democrat".

Hundreds of critics in various countries regard the author of *Leaves of Grass* as the poet of *bourgeois* democracy. Lunacharsky, however, says that "democracies throughout the history of

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[1] M. Gorky, op. cit., Vol. 24, p. 48 (in Russian).

mankind have been individualistic".[1] In America, a capitalist structure of society ("mobile-capitalist" in his characterization) founded on "individualism carried to the extreme..."[2] was accepted as the ideal. But was this Whitman's ideal? Lunacharsky demonstrates in his article that the poet's ideal was incomparably more lofty. He says that Walt Whitman's poetry was imbued with the ideas of brotherhood, friendship and love among human beings, that its vital principle was opposed to individualism, egoism and the spirit of ownership.

The equality preached by the American poet cannot be the "equality" of grains of sand, each of which exists on its own, quite separately from any other. This is a different kind of equality, "the equality of brotherly forces, united by the spirit of cooperation..."[3].

For Lunacharsky the most beautiful aspect of Whitman's work is his collectivist strivings, his desire for "adhesiveness", for the "merging" of individuals, the affirmation of the power and beauty of a man with "a wide-open heart". "There will be many such people," exclaims the critic, "when the walls of the solitary cells in the prison of individualism and private property-ownership fall down."[4]

While holding to the judgements of Gorky and Lunacharsky, I have attempted to analyze the process of Whitman's artistic development and to show it in its complexity. In a number of places in this book the individualistic tendencies in Whitman's poetry are revealed and emphasized. Note is taken of the *contradictions* in the poet's philosophy of life. There is no doubt that the individualist and collectivist tendencies in *Leaves of Grass* often clash with each other. Yet the most important, decisive fact about Whitman the poet is, in the final analysis, that he was a man with a "wide-open heart", attracted by collectivism. Herein lies the novelty of his poetry, both in conceptual and formal terms; it is this that makes for what Lunacharsky calls "Whitmanism".

All of this does not mean, of course, that in regarding Whitman as a "collectivist" rather than an "individualist", we can forget just how much the poet sometimes suffered from loneliness, the hostility of the press and the ill-disposition of the critics, and how he was anguished by the inattention of the reading public.

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[1] A. Lunacharsky, op. cit., Vol. 5, p. 386.
[2] Ibid., p. 387.
[3] Ibid.
[4] Ibid.

But then this is not what contemporary American critics really have in mind when they insist that the author of *Leaves of Grass* was a "solitary" man, a "loner".

The abundance of collectivist motifs in *Leaves of Grass* has already been demonstrated above and will be further enlarged upon in the chapters which follow.

The conviction that only outside the United States are readers and literary critics inclined to view Whitman as a collectivist rather than an individualist is wide-spread in American critical literature. But it is hardly correct. In Whitman's lifetime, Traubel, who was a very clear-sighted interpreter of his poetry, did not ascribe extreme individualism to the author of *Leaves of Grass.*

As for twentieth-century American literary criticism, I should like to quote two students of Whitman who rightfully occupy a very distinguished place in American literary studies, and who were both sincere democrats.

One of them is Vernon Parrington, who, in the last volume of his major work, *Main Currents in American Thought,* describes the poet in the following way: "So it was as a revolutionary that Whitman began his work; and a revolutionary he remained to the end.... It was this revolutionary spirit that made him the friend of all rebellious souls past and present." [1] Further on one reads about "the spirit of the radical forties", about "the revolutionary spirit of Europe" breaking in upon America and about "other influences ... confirming his (Whitman's.— *M. M.*) earlier views, endowing them with lyric passion and expanding them into a grandiose whole. Those influences," continues Parrington, "would seem to have been the fervid emotionalism of the fifties ... and the emerging scientific movement. On the whole perhaps it was the first, with its vague and expansive Utopianism, that bit most deeply...." [2]

As is well known the utopian teachings which found considerable support in the United States during the fifties were often militantly opposed to the philosophy of individualism, and Parringon says that "Whitman got from the expansive fifties and built into his thinking" the "idea of fraternity, made human and hearty by his warm love of men and women...". [3]

And here is the opinion of the critic F. O. Matthiessen as expressed in his posthumously published book *Theodore Dreiser* (the book was completed in 1950):

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[1] V. L. Parrington, *Main Currents in American Thought,* Vol. 3, N. Y., Harcourt, Brace, 1930, p. 73.

[2] Ibid., p. 74.

[3] Ibid., p. 76.

"Whitman, no less than Dreiser, was occupied with the new discoveries of science while equally determined to pass beyond the limitations of science. And as he dwelt upon cosmic wholeness, he also dwelt more and more upon the need of solidarity in society, and his political thought—again like Dreiser's—moved from individualism towards socialism." [1]

Thus there is no real basis for categorically juxtaposing the "Soviet" and the "American" approaches to Whitman.

"... All Else Giving Place to Men and Women Like You"

The poet found much around him that was bright and promising; but he was by no means a blind enthusiast who failed to notice the dark sides of life. After "Song of Myself", "Song of the Open Road" and many other poems, Whitman wrote "The Eighteenth Presidency", which included the words: "The sixteenth and seventeenth terms of the American Presidency have shown that the villainy and shallowness of great rulers are just as eligible to These States as to any foreign despotism...." [2]

Even in "Song of the Open Road" we feel repulsion and horror when the poet portrays people

... Smartly attired, countenance smiling, form upright,
death under the breast-bones,
hell under the skull-bones,
Under the broadcloth and gloves, under the ribbons and
artificial flowers,
Keeping fair with the customs, speaking not a syllable
of itself,
Speaking of any thing else but never of itself.

This is an aspect of Whitman's art which deserves special attention, for certain critics would have us believe that *Leaves of Grass* contains a completely one-sided picture of life, as though Whitman always saw life through rose-colored glasses.

More often than not, man in Whitman's poetry is beautiful, noble, passionate, straightforward, loving, athletic, clear-eyed, full-blooded, joyful, healthy, quick, lively, powerful, magnificent, wise, proud, magnanimous, enchanting, godlike, intelligent, moral, heroic, strong, devoted, calm and confident.

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[1] F. O. Matthiessen, *Theodore Dreiser*, Sloane, 1954, pp. 239-40.
[2] *Whitman's Workshop*, p. 96.

There are a great many more similarly exultant epithets to be found in Whitman's book.

Often the poet glorifies man in general and idealizes all his fellow-countrymen. In the preface to the 1855 edition of *Leaves of Grass* the poet asks a rhetorical question: is the "jealous and passionate instinct of American standards ... for the evergrowing communes of brothers and lovers...?" [1]. Well, that was what Whitman wanted Americans to become. The humanist poet would make every man a "camerado".

But in rereading *Leaves of Grass* we become more and more aware that Whitman did *not* regard all men and women in the United States as equally good. He loved above all the working people — seamen, farmers, factory-workers, fishermen, artisans. No American poet before Whitman had paid such constant attention to working men and the working class. In the poem "A Song for Occupations" (1855) we find the following lines:

You workwomen and workmen of these States having your
own divine and strong life,
And all else giving place to men and women like you.

Works in which Whitman asserts the grandeur of human labor are very numerous. Everywhere in *Leaves of Grass* there are pictures of the everyday work of builders, miners, farmers, cobblers, mechanics, bridge-builders, metal-workers. The poet boldly uses terms taken from the world of urban industrial labor. "A Song for Occupations", "Song of Myself" and other poems present a kind of encyclopedia of men at work. Whitman creates detailed and realistic pictures of the everyday working life of average Americans:

The huge storehouse carried up in the city well under way,
The six framing-men, two in the middle and two at each
end, carefully bearing on their shoulders
a heavy stick for a cross-beam,
The crowded line of masons with trowels in their right
hands, rapidly laying the long side-wall,
two hundred feet from front to rear,
The flexible rise and fall of backs, the continual
click of the trowels striking the bricks....

These lines are from "Song of the Broad-Axe", and I have quoted only a small part of the very long stanza devoted to the

[1] W. Whitman, *Leaves of Grass*, 1928, p. 506.

portrayal of human labor. "Song of Myself" also deals time and again with the most various kinds of work. Here is a rather typical example:

The paving-man leans on his two-handed rammer, the re-
porter's lead flies swiftly
over the note-book, the sign-
painter is lettering with blue and gold,
The canal boy trots on the tow-path, the book-keeper
counts at his desk, the shoe-
maker waxes his thread....

And here are some no less realistic scenes of other aspects of American life from the poem "I Sing the Body Electric":

The swimmer naked in the swimming-bath, seen as he swims
through the transparent green-shine,
or lies with his face up and rolls silently
to and fro in the heave of the water,
The bending forward and backward of rowers in row-boats,
the horseman in his saddle,
Girls, mothers, house-keepers, in all their performances,
The group of laborers seated at noon-time with their
open dinner kettles, and their
wives waiting,
The female soothing a child, the farmer's daughter in
the garden or cow-yard,
The young fellow hoeing corn, the sleigh-driver driving
his six horses through the crowd,
The wrestle of wrestlers, two apprentice-boys, quite
grown, lusty, good-natured, native-born,
out on the vacant
lot at sundown after work....

It is especially significant that the author of *Leaves of Grass* speaks with warmth not only of the everyday activities of the farmer and the hunter, to which poets devoted a great deal of attention before Whitman too, but also of the labor of the urban proletarian. William Bryant, it is true, spoke on occasion with genuine sympathy about the American workers, but the first American poet to penetrate to the very heart of the city, to

gain a clear awareness of the great role of workers in America, was Whitman.

The poet reproduces the life of city dwellers honestly, truthfully, accurately, with many unattractive details. It is obvious that here Whitman writes as a realist; but he does not cease to be a realist when he lauds the spiritual beauty of the common American worker.

Unlike the romantics, who copied details of daily life primarily to expose vulgarity and spiritual poverty, to show the tragic discrepancy between dream and reality, and unlike the popular humorists of the mid-century with their tendency toward realistic satire, who to a considerable degree showed the prosaic sides of everything in order to expose the ugliness of everyday existence, Whitman saw in daily life the normal and natural expression of things truly human. In his opinion, reality itself was noble, and everyday life contained much that was truly poetic.

Nor did Whitman attempt to dissolve the personality in the mass, to bring it down to a low level. Again and again he emphasizes the rights of each man's individual personality.

Yes, traces of romanticism can certainly be found in the image of the American that emerges in Whitman's works, the image of an independent, noble and bold man ready to fight for what he thinks right. This is already clear from certain previously mentioned epithets which characterize man in *Leaves of Grass.* At times one can sense the direct influence of American romantics and their ideal images. But nonetheless, in depicting common Americans, Whitman did not wholly give way to the impulses of imagination, did not stay fully within the sphere of romantic images, but started from the visible, from the factual.

Even in the works which were included in the early editions of *Leaves of Grass* there are none of the abstractions which are scattered so liberally through the odes of Lowell or Bryant. Whitman, the poet of man, is no friend to phrase-mongering. His language is most often that of the farmers or the city dweller, but it is always free from adulteration; it is not distorted and exaggerated to comic ends as in the writings of newspaper humorists or in Lowell's *The Biglow Papers.* It is dignified and authentic. Whitman speaks of man with respect and faith, glorifying people in the manner of the travelling anti-slavery orators.

In order to appreciate the specific features of Whitman's view of man as expressed in his lyrical poetry, which, for all its tendency to realism, is rich in romantic inflections, let us

compare *Leaves of Grass* with Thoreau's *Walden, or Life in the Woods*, which was published at almost exactly the same time (1854). *Walden* is built on the romantic negation of morality and the spiritual essence of bourgeois relations. In this witty and vivid work, full of ironic aphorisms and occasional realistic passages, Thoreau eulogizes the virtues of a life in which the material needs and economic ties of man with society are reduced to a minimum. In his foreword to a Russian translation of *Walden*, the Soviet critic A. Startsev rightly points out that Thoreau does not put forward any specific "program" in his book, but rather writes as a polemicist. In a highly paradoxical manner he puts forth his ideas on the perniciousness of the laws and practices of the world of property.

Thoreau had his fellow-countrymen in mind when he proffered the following generalization: "The mass of men lead lives of quiet desperation. What is called resignation is confirmed desperation. From the desperate city you go into the desperate country...." [1] He goes on to say that the laboring man has no time to be anything but a machine. As for the farmers, they "are sure to fail...".[2]

In still another part of his book Thoreau declares: "I have travelled a good deal in Concord: and everywhere, in shops, and offices,and fields, the inhabitants have appeared to me to be doing penance in a thousand remarkable ways." [3]

Like almost all the American romantics, the author of *Walden* compares the way of life of civilized people and that of savages, to the advantage of the latter.

It is easy to find features common to *Leaves of Grass* and *Walden*. The similarity in lyrical tone immediately stands out. Certain passages in *Walden* contain clearly Whitmanesque pictures of life, unexpectedly sharp, hyperbolic images. Thoreau says, for instance: "I wanted to live deep and suck out all the marrow of life...." [4]

The proximity of the views held by these two authors is undeniable, especially where slavery is concerned. Thoreau's mention of how he once sheltered a runaway slave brings to mind the story in "Song of Myself". And correspondingly, Whitman would quite willingly have concurred with several of Thoreau's indignant harangues about money-grubbers.

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[1] H. D. Thoreau, *Walden, or Life in the Woods*, N. Y., Heritage Club, 1939, p. 18.

[2] Ibid., p. 40.

[3] Ibid., p. 14.

[4] Ibid., p. 97.

Still, the differences between Whitman and the author of *Walden* are quite obvious. Whereas Thoreau repeatedly emphasizes the debasement and spiritual vacuity of man, we have seen that one of the corner-stones of *Leaves of Grass* is the idea of the magnificence of the working people. Whitman rejects the principle of curtailing human needs and demands; he dreams of the endless development of man, of his all-embracing progress which knows no limits.

Thoreau could see little of value or worthy of attention in the contemporary world. This philosophy is expressed in *Walden* in the following words, for example: "... if we stay at home and mind our business who will want railroads?" [1] In Whitman there is none of Thoreau's romantic tendency to contrast exalted nature to wretched man; he is the champion of the harmonious fusion of man and nature, nature and civilization.

Thoreau glorified solitude. No matter what individualistic tendencies we may find in Whitman's poetry, he decisively rejects the ideal of solitude and asceticism and bases his world-view on the irresistible attraction of people for each other.

It is interesting that the author of *Leaves of Grass* was aware of Thoreau's individualism and took him sharply to task for his insufficient democratic commitment.

Whereas Thoreau preferred to watch life pass by, Whitman strove to penetrate to the very depths of contemporary reality. The poet was also drawn toward the future, envisioned as far more joyful and dignified than the present. His revolutionary democratic instincts made him feel at the same time that the road to the future lay through conflict and struggle.

Thoreau did not immediately define his attitude to Whitman. He was initially antagonized by Whitman's truly militant democratism, and also by his defiance of established canons in the treatment of physical love. But eventually he spoke of Whitman's poetry as very brave and American. Still Whitman and Thoreau never became very close.

On the whole, Whitman accepted his isolation from the majority of recognized American men of letters with calm dignity. He knew especially well that he had nothing in common with the poets who were most popular with the critics.

A version of a poem unpublished during the poet's lifetime has been preserved, in which Whitman addresses "the prevailing bards". He calls himself "the bard of Democracy" and says:

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[1] Ibid., p. 98.

Others are more correct and elegant than I, and more at home in the parlors and schools than I,
But I alone advance among the people en-masse, coarse and strong....[1]

The poet's genuine "I", Whitman continues, lives in his poems, and only his "shadow", his "likeness" rushes about "seeking a livelihood".[2] Whitman sadly admits that while observing himself he often sees a creature which looks like him but is "never substantially" he at all.

But as a rule Whitman remained true to himself: a man of deep democratic convictions, a poet who loved the beautiful and knew how to create it.

"A Song of Joys"

Probably nothing in Whitman so annoys some literary critics of our time as his irrepressible optimism.

Whitman's affirmation of life is unacceptable for those contemporary writers who have been affected by modernist currents and existentialist philosophy. A good many sarcastic, scornful words have been said about Whitman's supposed "narrowness" and superficiality. He has been derided for lacking the boldness to recognize that life is a black quagmire, for being "deaf" to the all-powerful voice of death. The question is posed again and again: is the poet sincere? is his enthusiasm not forced?

First of all it must be said that the scholars who see only bright colors in Whitman's work have not read his poetry very attentively. The poet did not ignore the gloomier sides of life; he wrote of its tragic aspects as well. We know how deeply he mourned the evils of life, how tormented he was by the knowledge that everywhere there was baseness, treachery and greed. How often, according to his own words, he would contemplate the "meanness and agony" in this world. How clearly he saw the tears which flowed round about. How many tears he wept himself.

As for death.... On the eve of the war, in one of his most beautiful works "Out of the Cradle Endlessly Rocking" (1859) Whitman spoke agonizingly of the stern summons of death forever separating two loving hearts. The bird's song of mourning conveys sorrow and despair:

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[1] *Uncollected Poetry and Prose of Walt Whitman*, Vol. II, p. 91.

[2] Ibid.

Shake out carols!
Solitary here, the night's carols!
Carols of lonesome love! death's carols!
Carols under that lagging, yellow, waning moon!
O under that moon where she droops almost down into the sea!
O reckless despairing carols.

Then the war would come, and later still, when the poet was approaching old age, he would sing more and more often of death. Louder and louder rang the note of loss and separation from life.

The creator of *Leaves of Grass* was a poet with a wide-ranging palette, who painted reality in all its contrasts, in all the complexity and contradictions of an ever-changing world.

Even, so, those who "accuse" the American poet of optimism are quite right. Above the groans of suffering, the funeral songs, through the dark clouds, the triumphant voice of life almost always rings out in *Leaves of Grass.* Dozens and dozens of Whitman's poems emanate joy and hope.

The poet took immense, unfailing pleasure in the eternal charms of nature. His appreciation of the modest beauty of his native fields, meadows, lakes and rivers is quite remarkable. He sees every blade of grass, feels every breath of breeze. It is not the exotic scenes, but the everyday environs of the farmer, that attract the poet.

The nature which is glorified in *Leaves of Grass* is the nature of Long Island, the nature of Pennsylvania, Ohio, of New Jersey. The poem called "A Song of Joys" is about people who enjoy "gleesome saunter over fields and hillsides", "the exquisite smell of the earth at daybreak", "the moist fresh stillness of the woods".

For Walt Whitman, nature is not an abstract ideal opposed to civilization, but an inexhaustible source of real beauty, a part of a beautiful world. In "Song of Myself" we are shown a man who is "in love" with the atmosphere.

Whitman is a remarkable master of the landscape. Often he has been depicted as a man who valued only the serenity of nature. This is not so. He also praised "the proud music of the storm". In his poetry the ocean is often turbulent and stormy, in tune with Whitman's unquiet spirit:

Sea of stretch'd ground-swells,
Sea breathing broad and convulsive breaths,
Sea of the brine of life and of unshovell'd yet
always-ready graves,

Howler and scooper of storms, capricious and dainty sea,
I am integral with you....

These lines from "Song of Myself" are amazing in their brilliant imagery ("unshovell'd ... graves", "scooper of storms", "convulsive breaths", and so on). And they are preceded by a stanza containing even more striking images:

You sea! I resign myself to you also — I guess what
you mean,
I behold from the beach your crooked inviting
fingers,
I believe you refuse to go back without feeling of me,
We must have a turn together, I undress, hurry me
out of sight of the land,
Cushion me soft, rock me in billowy drowse,
Dash me with amorous wet, I can repay you.

Whitman had good reason to say in his *American Primer* that he likes "limber, lasting, fierce,... strong, cutting, beautiful, rude words".[1]

Whitman loved the power, the wild madness and the tenderness of the sea. The poem "Proud Music of the Storm" (1868), which was written soon after the Civil War (an echo of the stormy events of the war years still reverberates in it) begins with the following "fierce" words:

Proud music of the storm,
Blast that careers so free, whistling across the
prairies,
Strong hum of forest tree-tops — wind of the mountains....
You undertone of rivers, roar of pouring cataracts,
You sounds from distant guns with galloping cavalry....

Still, nature in Whitman's poetry is most often depicted as bright, redolent of music and merriment. "Song of the Open Road" contains the following lines:

The earth expanding right hand and left hand,
The picture alive, every part in its best light,

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[1] W. Whitman, *A Critical Anthology*, Ed. by F. Murphy, Harmondsworth, Penguin Books, 1969, p. 74.

The music falling in where it is wanted,
and stopping where it is not wanted,
The cheerful voice of the public road,
the gay fresh sentiment of the road.

For Whitman nature is often miraculous. Bees are a miracle, and so are animals grazing in the fields. Birds, the sunset, the breaking of the surf, they are all miracles. In his poem "Miracles" (1856) the poet writes of nature and human beings:

These with the rest, one and all, are to me miracles,
The whole referring, yet each distinct and in its place.

In 1960 there was published for the first time a previously unknown poem by Whitman entitled "Wood Odors". (It was probably written in the eighties when the poet was already quite old.) The poem reflects once more Whitman's subtle love of nature. In begins with words that are simple and tender:

Morning after a night-rain
The fresh-cool summer-scent
Odors of pine and oak
The shade.

Wandering the negligent paths — the soothing silence,
The stillness....[1]

The poet's celebration of nature and the joys it promises does not merely derive from his exceptional aesthetic sensibilities. He also has in mind the findings of science and sets forth the results of philosophical contemplation which also, he feels, permit to draw hopeful conclusions. Whitman more than once described the earth's ability to turn what is filthy and dead into new life sparkling with the freshness of spring. The poem "This Compost" (1856) is a song in praise of the eternal life of nature, which is constantly resurrected and lends the strength of its recurrent youth to people.

To a certain extent "This Compost" is a key to Whitman's philosophical outlook. The poet believes not only that inanimate nature is capable of regeneration, but also that what is low

[1] *Harper's*, Dec. 1960, p. 43.

and unclean in people's lives can be transformed into something dignified, heroic and beautiful.

It stands to reason that the poet could not follow in the footsteps of those romantics who, while singing the praises of untrodden pathways, saw in people only the eternal defilers of natural beauty. Whitman strove for harmony, for the unity of beautiful nature and beautiful man. The poet's portraits of working men and women and his pictures of city life are usually as poetic and lucid as his descriptions of nature.

It would not be right to say with the philosopher William James that "the mere joy of living is so immense in Walt Whitman's veins that it abolishes the possibility of any other kind of feeling...".[1] The poet knew many "other kinds" of feelings. But in spite of all the tears, fury, bloody conflicts and deaths to be found on the pages of *Leaves of Grass* Whitman's lyric hero, as a rule, takes joy in life and regards the world with confidence; he sings, dances and enjoys the delights of love.

In "Song of Myself" the feeling that life is good, that the earth and the people on it are good, finds its aphoristic expression:

I pass death with the dying and birth with the new-wash'd
babe, and am not contain'd
between my hat and boots,
And peruse manifold objects, no two alike and every one
good,
The earth good and the stars good, and their adjuncts
all good.

Where, then, are we to look for the sources of Whitman's remarkable optimism, which contrasts so sharply with the gloomy atmosphere so often depicted by the American romantics?

In one of his speeches before the Civil War Abraham Lincoln said:

"We live in the midst of alarms; anxiety beclouds the future; we expect some new disaster with each newspaper we read...." And quoting this "Lost Speech" Sandburg emphasizes that it was "delivered the same year Walt Whitman's *Leaves of Grass* was first published".[2] At about the same time, Whitman

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[1] W. Whitman, *The Critical Heritage*, Ed. by M. Hindus, L., Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1971, p. 240.

[2] W. Whitman, *Leaves of Grass*, N. Y., Modern Library, 1921, pp. VIII-IX.

himself wrote that many of his contemporaries were becoming old and sickly in their youth. So we must ask again: what is the source of these hymns to the joy which rules the world, these hymns to beautiful men living in beautiful times?

The years when the first editions of *Leaves of Grass* appeared were far from easy for the Whitman family. The poet's brothers and sisters all suffered misfortune, and his own life was a hard one.

Why, then, did Walt Whitman regard the world with exultation?

Bourgeois critics are unable to find a way out of this "labyrinth of contradictions". Many of them are especially nonplussed by the contrast between the rainbow colors of the poet's work and the gloom of his personal life, so dogged by misfortune (perhaps the poet was lying, or only pretending to be joyful?). Those critics who seek an answer to the "puzzle" of Whitman not only in his personal biography, but also in the general historical and political situation fall into error when they ascribe the poet's optimism either to an economic boom in the country while *Leaves of Grass* was being written, or to the extension of the territory of the United States. Sometimes both these "factors" are mentioned.

Many years ago, for instance, the literary historian Newton Arvin, who made quite a few interesting observations about Whitman's life (in particular, he showed that from childhood the poet was influenced by democratic ideas in his family), nonetheless spoke without foundation of the poet's "rather inglorious record in the days of the Abolitionists" [1], emphasizing, at the same time, that Whitman "came to maturity in decades ... of lush material growth and jubilant expansion ...".[2] Nowadays these ideas are repeated almost word for word by some younger critics.

Whitman's poetry undoubtedly reflected the hopes of millions of Americans that the boundless expanses of unoccupied land would provide security for the working people of the United States and for their children. But the voice we hear in *Leaves of Grass* is not the voice of the self-satisfied businessman intoxicated by the boom in industry or agriculture and the growth of the country's might and wealth. This is

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[1] N. Arvin, *Whitman*, N. Y., Macmillan, 1938, p. 33.

[2] Ibid., p. 18.

not the purport of Whitman's poems, which glorify simple working people, the men who follow the plough or forge metal. This is not why he praises comradely love and calls for a struggle against the slave owners. The great American poet was too much disheartened with what was taking place in his country just before the Civil War. His expectations of American democracy were too high.

The joyful tones of Whitman's poetry above all express the world-view of an ordinary working man who is spiritually healthy and feels himself to be part of an immortal whole—the people. Whitman's optimism is akin to that of folk tales; but it was also the product of the conditions of life in the United States at a time when the social contradictions of American capitalism were not completely apparent and the people in the United States were first of all faced with democratic tasks which appeared to have a fair chance of being realized. Another factor was the influence of the principles of utopian socialism. Taken together, all these considerations help us to understand the personal and social roots of Whitman's indestructible love of life.

More About Whitman's "Rhythmic Style"

Whitman's poetry is an art of the highest order. Just as the author of *Leaves of Grass* was a revolutionary in his social views, so was he a revolutionary as regards poetic form.

One of the most important formal features of *Leaves of Grass* is its specific "rhythmic style". It is a curious fact that Whitman once voiced the apprehension that this poetic style might affect his lectures. The form of *Leaves of Grass* has many sources. One of these sources is indisputably the Bible, whose rhythms had an influence not only on Whitman's work of 1850, but also on the poems he wrote later and included in *Leaves of Grass.* Nonetheless, the poet's "rhythmic style" was not borrowed but created by himself.

It would be wrong to assert, as is often done, that practically all of Whitman's poetry is built on an outright rejection of syllabo-tonic versification. Some of his short poems and parts of the longer poems are written in strict (or almost strict) syllabo-tonic meter. Thus, the first lines of "Song of Myself" appear as slightly modified iambics. In the poem "Pioneers! O Pioneers!" the poet uses mainly trochees.

But what is particularly important is that the "rhythmic style" of most of Whitman's poetry owes its originality to his use of various classical meters, but in very complex combinations. Take, for instance, these lines in "When Lilacs Last in the Dooryard Bloom'd":

In the swamp in secluded recesses,
A shy and hidden bird is warbling a song.
Solitary the thrush,
The hermit withdrawn to himself, avoiding the settlements,
Sings by himself a song.

Song of the bleeding throat....

Here are a few rather typical lines from the poem "I Hear America Singing":

I hear America singing, the varied carols I hear,
Those of mechanics, each one singing his as it should be blithe and strong,
The carpenter singing his as he measures his plank or beam,
The mason singing his as he makes ready for work, or leaves off work....
The delicious singing of the mother, or of the young wife at work, or of the girl sewing or washing,
Each singing what belongs to him or her and to none else....

And here is another example, from "Out of the Cradle Endlessly Rocking":

Shine! shine! shine!
Pour down your warmth, great sun!
While we bask, two together,

Two together!
Winds blow south, or winds blow north,
Day come white, or night come black,
Home, or rivers and mountains from home,
Singing all time, minding no time,
While we two keep together.

In all these passages a close relationship to syllabo-tonic verse is maintained. And where Whitman departs from the canons of syllabo-tonic verse, an important part is played by the distribution within lines, stanzas, or the whole poem of primary stressed syllables. The number of unstressed syllables can be varied almost at will. The poet rarely wrote verses in which all the lines had an identical number of stressed syllables. The number of stressed syllables in the various lines, however, follows a definite poetic conception.

One immediately notes, for instance, Whitman's tendency to begin a stanza with a short introductory line, or two lines having the same number of stressed syllables (but quite often an unequal number of unstressed syllables), and then to expand the lines, as he introduces new content into the stanza, and finally to finish it off with a short line which conveys the bulk of the meaning.

Thus the stanza, which is thematically unified, is endowed with rhythmic unity and expressiveness. A section of the poem "Out of the Cradle Endlessly Rocking" is a magnificent example. The poet creates a picture of the growing love for poetry of a "curious" and "ecstatic" boy, who had once heard a bird sing a plaint for the death of its mate.

The aria sinking,
All else continuing, the stars shining,
The winds blowing, the notes of the bird continuous
echoing,
With angry moans the fierce old mother incessantly
moaning,
On the sands of Paumanok's shore gray and rustling,
The yellow half-moon enlarged, sagging down, drooping,
the face of the sea almost touching,
The boy ecstatic, with his bare feet the waves, with
his hair the atmosphere dallying,
The love in the heart long pent, now loose, now at
last tumultuously bursting,
The aria's meaning, the ears, the soul, swiftly
depositing,
The strange tears down the cheeks coursing,
The colloquy there, the trio, each uttering,
The undertone, the savage old mother incessantly
crying,

To the boy's soul's questions sullenly timing, some
drown'd secret hissing,
To the outsetting bard.

The final words, "to the outsetting bard", reflect the significance of the whole poem with its many rich images. A poet has been born from a bird's song about the sufferings of a loving heart. The remarkable rhythmic structure of the stanza gives it a dynamic unity. One readily notes, of course, the syntactical parallelisms at the end of all lines except the last one: sinking, shining, echoing, etc. The whole poem is coiled like a steel spring.

Since primary stressed syllables are so important in Whitman's poetry, systematically repeated caesurae within the line are also very significant. The poet makes skilful use of such pauses to enrich the poem's rhythmic pattern. In the following lines from "Song of Myself", in which a kind of summary is made of everything Whitman said about the relationship of the lyric and the epic in his poetry, the pauses within the lines are emphasized with particular strength:

The city sleeps and the country sleeps,
The living sleep for their time, the dead sleep for
their time,
The old husband sleeps by his wife and the young
husband sleeps by his wife;
And these tend inward to me, and I tend outward to
them,
And such as it is to be of these more or less I am,
And of these one and all I weave the song of myself.

Most of these lines are divided by a caesura in a manner unusually regular for Whitman. Only the lines "And such as it is to be of these more or less I am, / And of these one and all I weave the song of myself", which convey the central idea of the poet's unity with all the people he has represented, stand out as unbroken units. The result is a stupendous artistic effect.

The rhythmic quality of Whitman's poetry derives from his wide use of repeated syntactical structures within a stanza. The poet is fond of using more or less identical syntactical structures in the beginning of lines.

Here is an example from the poem "A Song of Joys":

O the joy of a manly self-hood!
To be servile to none, to defer to none, not to any tyrant known or unknown,
To walk with erect carriage, a step springy and elastic,
To look with calm gaze or with a flashing eye,
To speak with a full and sonorous voice out of a broad chest,
To confront with your personality all the other personalities of the earth.

Whitman's characteristic predilection for such syntactic patterns is often aimed at expressing his feeling that the world is one and that all of its parts are equally important and valuable. The poet's gaze encompasses many different spheres of life; he addresses working men of various trades, the workers of various regions of the United States and other countries, and even nature itself with tender reassurances and greetings, seeking to assert the idea of the equality of everything genuine and alive. "Salut au Monde!" contains the following words:

You whoever you are!
You daughter or son of England!
You of the mighty Slavic tribes and empires! you Russ in Russia!
You dim-descended, black, divine-soul'd African, large, fine-headed, nobly-form'd, superbly destin'd, on equal terms with me!

And in "Song of the Broad-Axe" Whitman celebrates various lands:

Welcome are all earth's lands, each for its kind,
Welcome are lands of pine and oak,
Welcome are lands of the lemon and fig,
Welcome are lands of gold,
Welcome are lands of wheat and maize, welcome those of the grape,
Welcome are lands of sugar and rice....

Syntactic parallelism strengthens the rhythmic structure of Whitman's poetry. In the beautiful poem "Crossing Brooklyn

Ferry" the poet resorts to this device in order to emphasize the beauty of the world. The sea is magnificent, and so are "gorgeous clouds of the sunset", countless crowds of passengers on the ferry-boats, "the flags of all nations", etc.

Nor are beauty, magnificence and equality the sole concepts in *Leaves of Grass*; they are interwoven with the principle of revolt. Revolution and harmony do not exclude each other, but occur in many varied combinations, and finally appear as a unity.

Is it surprising, then, that although Whitman's poetry is based on definite (albeit complex) rules of versification, his poems often give the impression of something chaotic and even frightening?

Such an impression accrues especially from the fact that the poet often depicts nature on a gigantic scale. We see majestic mountains, stormy seas, the clashing of elemental forces.

Moreover, the poet is forever in motion. He moves from one picture of nature to a second, third and fourth. Forward, always forward to the new and the unknown. "I inhale great draughts of space..."—these words from "Song of the Open Road" are very characteristic of Whitman.

The Soviet poet Eduardas Mieželaitis brought out the stormy character of Whitman's poetry in his poem "Niagara Falls, or A Walk With Walt Whitman". The famous waterfall here stands as a symbol of the might of the American poet.

Mieželaitis creates images in which nature and society join in one harmonious and yet rebellious whole, reflecting precisely that mighty force whose presence is so palpable in Whitman's poetry.

"My Spirit Has Pass'd ... Around the Whole Earth!"

Although he was American to the marrow of his bones, Whitman managed to avoid the stamp of narrow nationalism. The poet's path led from a quiet little village to noisy New York, and from there into the great wide world. His love for the working man encompassed the people of the whole world.

One of Whitman's best poems is called "Salut au Monde!" (1856). It is a song in honor of all nations and races of the earth. "What do you see Walt Whitman?" the poem's author

asks himself. "Who are they you salute, and that one after another salute you?"

He sees and gives his greeting to "all the inhabitants of the earth". He sees all the countries of the world, all of humanity. Whoever you may be, man of this earth, for Whitman you are an equal and a lover.

My spirit has pass'd in compassion and determination
around the whole earth,
I have look'd for equals and lovers and found them
ready for me in all lands,
I think some divine rapport has equalized me with them.

And he really has in mind the people of all lands. I have already quoted the lines in which he speaks of Englishmen, Russians and Africans. He writes with love also of

You Frenchwoman and Frenchman of France!
You Belge! you liberty-lover of the Netherlands!
(you stock whence I myself have
descended;) ...
You working-man of the Rhine, the Elbe, or the
Weser! you working-woman too!
You Sardinian! you Bavarian! Swabian! Saxon!
Wallachian! Bulgarian!
You Roman! Neapolitan! you Greek!
You lithe matador in the arena at Seville!
You mountaineer living lawlessly on the Taurus or
Caucasus!

"Salut au Monde!" contains many of Whitman's typical enumerations. At the same time the poem is full of anaphora, as though the poet were rhyming the opening words of each line:

I see the places of the sagas,
I see pine-trees and fir-trees torn by northern
blasts,
I see granite bowlders and cliffs....

And further on:

I see the nomadic tribes with herds of oxen and cows,
I see the table-lands notch'd with ravines, I see
the jungles and deserts....

This poem clearly demonstrates the idea behind these "catalogues", as they are often disparagingly called, and their artistic value. In placing the Dutchmen, from whose stock he himself has descended, almost side by side with "nomadic tribes", Negroes with Frenchwomen, mountaineers with the workers of the Rhine, the poet forcefully instils the idea of the unity of the world and the equality of all men.

Walt Whitman, the poet of the revolutionary struggle for freedom and the solidarity of working people, was a true internationalist; and although some of Whitman's parallelisms may sound monotonous, the internationalist ideas of the author of "Salut au Monde!" are not merely ideas, but often take the form of living images. The poet's warm presence can be felt in practically everything he says about people living in the far corners of the earth. We trust him when he says:

You vapors, I think I have risen with you, moved away
to distant continents, and fallen
down there, for reasons,
I think I have blown with you you winds;
You waters I have finger'd every shore with you....

The poet sees and hears everything going on in the world. And we are glad to reply with a friendly word to his greeting.

In "Salut au Monde!", the uniform syntactical organization of the verses conveys the idea of the equality of all human beings with maximum poetic force. At the same time this poem demonstrates the poet's love of sound parallelism and especially word repetition.

Rhyme is rarely found in Whitman's poetry though one could name a number of poems containing rhymed lines: e. g., the poem "O Captain! My Captain!", the introduction to the poem "Song of the Broad-Axe", parts of the poem "The Singer in the Prison".

Actually, repetition often serves the function of rhyme. When he repeats the words "I see" or "I hear" at the beginning of lines which speak of the various peoples of the world, the poet is stressing his equally friendly attitude toward all of them, and the sound parallelism and word repetition reinforce the syntactical parallelism. Thus Whitman asks "What do you hear Walt Whitman?" and answers:

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I hear the workman singing and the farmer's wife
singing,
I hear in the distance the sounds of children and of
animals early in the day,
I hear emulous shouts of Australians pursuing the
wild horse...
I hear fierce French liberty songs....

It goes on like this for many more lines. Further on the poet asks "What do you see Walt Whitman?", and answers at even greater length:

I see a great round wonder rolling through space...
I see the curious rapid change of the light and shade,
I see distant lands, as real and near to the
inhabitants of them as my land is to me.

There is something similar to this in the lines from "Song of the Broad-Axe" ("Welcome are all earth's lands, each for its kind..."), in which the principles of internationalism are also upheld.

Repetition is the basis of still more varied and complex sound effects in many of the poet's works on love and nature. One of Whitman's most beautiful creations, the poem "Out of the Cradle Endlessly Rocking", owes much of its musical quality to word repetitions and syntactic parallelism. The rather long beginning, which consists of only one stanza (and one phrase), is structured in such a way that only the next to the last words disclose the meaning. It is the concluding chord which gives the stanza unity and coherence.

Out of the cradle endlessly rocking,
Out of the mocking-bird's throat, the musical shuttle...
A reminiscence sing.

Anaphora is a highly characteristic feature of Whitman's verse. An American scholar has reckoned that more than two-fifths of all the lines in *Leaves of Grass* begin with reiterations. Repetition of words at the end of lines is used less often by the poet, but is encountered in some of his works. An example is a stanza from "Song of Myself" which is based on

the reiteration of the words "it shall be you!" The stanza begins with the following words:

> *If I worship one thing more than another it shall*
> *be the spread of my own body, or any*
> *part of it....*

and then Whitman goes on to speak of many "parts" of his body and of the universe in general, not simply listing them but portraying everything poetically. He says, for instance:

> *Breast that presses against other breasts it shall*
> *be you!...*
> *Mix'd tussled hay of head, beard, brawn, it shall be*
> *you!...*
> *Sun so generous it shall be you!*
> *Vapors lighting and shading my face it shall be you!*

The repetitions here sound just like rhymes, but at the same time they function as a kind of leitmotif; once again the poet greets all that is alive and beautiful, and delights in life with all its marvellous variety.

Of course, at times Whitman loses his sense of proportion. On occasion he repeats the same words so many times that his poetry begins to sound monotonous. This happens at certain points in "Song of the Broad-Axe" and "Salut au Monde!". But usually Wnitman's use of repetitions is subtle and highly expressive.

The poet had a magnificent aural sense. In Whitman's most successful works the reader finds an infinitely rich texture of rhythmical variations, a kind of melody produced by the most varied artistic means and organically connected with the ideas expressed.

It is important to note that the poet invariably divided his longer poems into stanzas. Of course, Whitman's stanzas are not based on a given rhyme structure; the most important factor here is the unity of meaning, but Whitman also attempted to make the stanza as formally perfect as possible. Specific syntactical structure and intonation, a definite rhythm and a special system of repetitions, pauses, etc.,—these are all distinctive features of Whitman's stanzas.

Quite often the poet's stanzas begin and end in the same manner, with a short line, or a line of particular semantic significance is repeated at the very end of the stanza (quite often in a modified version).

Sometimes stanzaic unity is achieved by placing the most crucial words at the end. Sometimes several stanzas begin in an identical manner. The "artlessness" of Whitman's poetry is in fact the fruit of long, intense and patient work by an exacting and original artist.

""Elusive, Yet Undeniably Magnetizing You"

Walt Whitman's fresh and robust perception of nature, the joyful tone of his poetry, his tendency to animate the woods and prairies—these qualities speak of a certain kinship between his poetry and the oral poetry of the American Indians. This kinship is also confirmed by similarities in motifs and formal elements.

For many years scholars showed little interest in Indian art and a great deal of their folklore has perished without a trace. Present-day American students of Indian folklore have remarked that interest in translations of Indian poetry arose in the United States only in the middle of the nineteenth century. "... The beginning of wide interest in native poetry in translation properly dates from the year 1851...,"[1] states A. Grove Day, for instance. At that time there appeared Henry Schoolcraft's first monumental studies of the life of the Indians. In the third volume of his work, published a year before the appearance of *Leaves of Grass*, Schoolcraft writes: "No collections and translations of their (Indian.—*M.M.*) forest and war choruses and songs have been made which at all do justice to the sentiments and ideas expressed. It is perhaps too early in our literary history to expect such collections."[2]

Yet the songs, legends and tales of the Indians, which were passed by word of mouth from generation to generation,

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[1] A. Grove Day, *The Sky Clears*, N. Y., Macmillan, 1951, p. 27.

[2] H. R. Schoolcraft, *Historical and Statistical Information Respecting the History, Condition and Prospects of the Indian Tribes of the United States*, Part III, Philadelphia, Lippincott, Grambo, 1854, p. 327.

preserve the memory of the ways of life and feelings of these people before they were condemned to slow extinction on the reservations. The works of Indian folklore which have been published give a vivid impression of the Indians' love for freedom, their bold imagination and dignity, as well as their deeply poetic vision of nature. Indian folklore is an important part of the culture of the country.

Walt Whitman always evinced a lively interest in the Indians, the interest of a genuine friend and an artist who recognized the natural nobility of the Indian. The poet cherished the tradition established by Freneau and Cooper in their deeply sympathetic portrayal of the Indians cruelly exterminated by the "civilizers".

In *Leaves of Grass*, as in the works of Freneau and Cooper, Indians appear as dignified and beautiful human beings. For instance, Whitman gives a rapturous depiction of an Indian woman in his poem "The Sleepers". Her step, he says, "was free and elastic", and her voice "sounded exquisitely as she spoke".

In "Song of Myself" there is a warm description of the wedding of a trapper to a "red girl".

Her father and his friends sat near cross-legged and
dumbly smoking, they had moccasins
to their feet and large thick blankets
hanging from their shoulders,
On a bank lounged the trapper, he was drest mostly
in skins, his luxuriant beard
and curls protected his neck,
he held his bride by the hand,
She had long eyelashes, her head was bare, her coarse
straight locks descended upon
her voluptuous limbs and
reach'd to her feet.

According to the testimony of an Englishman who visited the poet in his old age in Camden, Whitman had a picture of an Indian hanging in one of the rooms of his small house. The poet said that the painter Catlin had given it to him. Apparently it showed Osceola, the chief of the Seminole tribe.

Whitman described Osceola as a fearless man who could not endure life in captivity. When he was captured by the Americans after a long war, he died, according to the poet, quite literally of a broken heart.

The poem "Osceola", written by Whitman about two years before his death, tells of the hero's final hour. It is imbued with the greatest respect for the freedom-loving Indian. Osceola, says the poet,

Drew on his war-dress, shirt, leggings, and girdled
the belt around his waist...
Put the scalp-knife carefully in his belt — then
lying down, resting a moment,
Rose again, half sitting, smiled, gave in silence his
extended hand to each and all,
Sank faintly low to the floor (tightly grasping the
tomahawk handle,)
Fix'd his look on wife and little children — the last:

(And here a line in memory of his name and death.)

In "An Indian Bureau Reminiscence", written after the Civil War, the poet speaks of the Indians as "indeed chiefs, in heroic massiveness, imperturbability, muscle, and that last and highest beauty consisting of strength...". "My here-alluded-to experience in the Indian Bureau," he continues, "produced one very definite conviction, as follows: There is something about these aboriginal Americans, in their highest characteristic representations, essential traits, and the ensemble of their physique and physiognomy — something very remote, very lofty, arousing comparisons with our own civilized ideals.... There were moments, as I look'd at them or studied them, when our own exemplification of personality, dignity, heroic presentation ... seem'd sickly, puny, inferior."

Whitman was captivated by the poetic quality of the Indians' imagination and language. He dearly loved Indian words, which, as he wrote in one of his articles, "are often perfect". In the poet's notebooks one can find whole lists of Indian names for various places. He found them extremely expressive, sonorous and poetic. Whitman also fought for the restoration of the Indian names of some rivers, islands, etc., where they had been replaced by English ones.

"California," he said in *American Primer*, "is sown thick with the names of all the little and big saints. Chase them away and substitute aboriginal names." [1] "The name of Niagara should be substituted for the St. Lawrence. Among the places that stand in need of fresh appropriate names are the great cities of St Louis, New Orleans, St Paul." [2] In the poem "Starting from Paumanok", Whitman says that Indians had charged "the water and the land with names".

In his short poem entitled "Yonnondio" he writes (explaining that the word means "lament for the aborigines"):

Yonnondio — I see, far in the west or north,
a limitless ravine, with plains and
mountains dark,
I see swarms of stalwart chieftains, medicine-
men, and warriors...
A muffled sonorous sound, a wailing word is borne
through the air for a moment,
Then blank and gone and still, and utterly lost.

It is possible that the poet heard Indian songs directly from the Indians themselves, but more important is the fact that while Whitman was working on "Song of Myself" and other poems which made up the first edition of *Leaves of Grass*, the American press first began to publish Schoolcraft's translations of the tales and legends of the Indians. Longfellow made wide use of these translations in *The Song of Hiawatha*, which was published in the same year as the first edition of *Leaves of Grass*. There is good reason to suppose that Whitman, too, acquainted himself with the translations of Indian songs which became available to the American public in the fifties.

Schoolcraft protested against the use of Greek metrics and English rules of rhyme in translations of Indian folklore. The Indians have neither the one nor the other, he wrote. At the same time Schoolcraft emphasized the typical tendency of Indian folklore to use repetitions and parallelisms. As an example, he cited a song of one of the Indian tribes which tells of a snowfall (the appearance of the "white spirit"). The beginning of the song is as follows:

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[1] W. Whitman, *A Critical Anthology*, 1969, p. 77.
[2] Ibid., p. 78.

See how the white spirit presses us,
Presses us — presses us — heavy and long;
Alas! you are heavy, ye spirits so white,
Presses us down to the frost-bitten earth.
Alas! you are cold — you are cold — you are cold.
Ah! Cease, shining spirits, the fall from the skies,
Ah, Cease so to crush us and keep us in dread....[1]

The following lines from an Indian poem translated by the American ethnographer D. Brinton, who became a friend of Whitman's after the Civil War, are also very characteristic:

After the rushing waters had subsided the Lenape of
the turtle were close together,
in hollow houses, living together there.
It freezes where they abode, it snows where they
abode, it storms where they abode,
it is cold where they abode.[2]

Parallelisms abound, for instance, in an Indian love-song published by an American journal in the middle of the nineteenth century:

Awake! flower of the forest — beautiful bird of the
prairie!
Awake! awake! thou with the eyes of the fawn...
The earth smiles — the waters smile — the heavens smile,
but I — I lose the way of smiling
when thou art not near —
Awake, awake! my beloved.[3]

In *The Song of Hiawatha,* Longfellow borrowed several images as recorded by Schoolcraft. He also made extended use of the device of repetition. In the introduction to the poem he refers to the frequent use of repetition in Indian tales and legends. It is worthy of note that five of the first seven lines of

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[1] H. R. Schoolcraft, *Historical and Statistical Information...*, Part III, p. 329.
[2] A. Grove Day, *The Sky Clears*, p. 129.
[3] *Haiwatha With Its Original Indian Legends*, Lancaster, Pa., Cattell, 1944, pp. 152-53.

Hiawatha begin with the same word. The author, however, did not take account of the rhythmical peculiarities of Indian songs. The trochaic tetrameter of *Hiawatha* has nothing in common with the form of Indian songs.

Although Whitman did not set himself the task of imitating works of Indian folklore, many of his poems are very close to them, both in form and in spirit. In speaking of a "collection of aboriginal poetry" which had been published in the United States, Whitman said that the poetry of the Indians had a quality which was "elusive, yet undeniably magnetizing you" [1]. The attractiveness of this poetry, of course, lies not only in the abundance of parallelisms or the distinctive rhythms, but also in the wealth of images based on a poetic vision of the world. If, for example, you listen carefully to Whitman's address to the earth in the "still nodding night" ("Song of Myself"), it brings to mind the Indian love-song quoted above and some other examples of Indian folklore.

"Song of Myself" contains its own kind of love-song:

Smile O voluptuous cool-breath'd earth!
Earth of the slumbering and liquid trees!
Earth of departed sunset — earth of the mountains
misty-topt!
Earth of the vitreous pour of the full moon just
tinged with blue!
Earth of shine and dark mottling the tide of the
river!
Earth of the limpid gray of clouds brighter and
clearer for my sake!
Far-swooping elbow'd earth — rich apple-blossom'd
earth!
Smile, for your lover comes.

The melodious quality of these lines flows from the interweaving of rhyme-like repetitions and from the whole rhythmic structure of the stanza, in which love for nature takes on the form of a sensuous passion for the "voluptuous" earth.

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[1] H. Traubel, *With Walt Whitman in Camden*, Ed. by Sculley Bradley, Philadelphia, Univ. of Pennsylvania Press, 1953, Vol. 4, p. 86.

It should be added that it was probably from the Indians that Whitman borrowed his characteristic device of calling himself by name in his poetry. In one of his lecture notes Whitman wrote, "Why not mention myself by name, Walt Wh——, in my speeches—aboriginal fashion?"[1]

We do not know whether Whitman did so in his orations, but we do know that in "Song of Myself" he mentions the son of Manhattan, Walt Whitman. Let me add that the Soviet poet Vladimir Mayakovsky was probably influenced by the author of *Leaves of Grass* in this respect.

Real Life in Them

Many of Whitman's poems have an exalted romantic atmosphere. Romantic tendencies are apparent in *Leaves of Grass* where he uses, for example, utopian motifs, and also in the works written before the war, where the poet idealized the average American in the image of a man molded by the heroic struggle for liberation. Romantic strains can also be found, of course, in many of Whitman's landscapes. Whitman's grandeur is in many ways the grandeur of romanticism. But by and large Whitman's poetry is realistic. In *Leaves of Grass* he set himself the task of creating full-blooded, colorful works with real life in them. The poet strives to imbibe the whole of America. This is the reason for the abundance of episodes and sketches of nature and people which is so typical of his poems.

In the very years when Whitman's poetic gifts were beginning to flower, in faraway Russia, where realism had already made great progress, the critic Belinsky remarked that talented writers were now reproducing reality where once they had concentrated on non-reality. No matter what influence the romantic tradition may have had on Whitman even after he had abandoned his graveyard motifs, it must not be forgotten that the poet deliberately strove, from the fifties onwards, to reproduce the truth of life. The fields, the sea and the woods in *Leaves of Grass* are alive, genuine. In the images he created, Whitman emphasizes faithfulness to reality.

Only a realist could create, for instance, such a precise, meaningful picture as the funeral of a coach driver in "To Think of Time" (1855). The reader is presented with "a

[1] *Whitman's Workshop*, p. 36.

frequent sample of the life and death of workmen", one of those people that the poet knew so well.

"A gray discouraged sky overhead", "half-frozen mud in the streets". The funeral rites are short, the coffin "is pass'd out, lower'd and settled, the whip is laid on the coffin, the earth is swiftly shovel'd in...". "He is decently put away—is there any thing more?" But an entire human life is over, and this is "a reminiscence of the vulgar fate". Whitman says of the man who has died:

He was a good fellow, free-mouth'd, quick-temper'd,
not bad-looking,
Ready with life or death for a friend, fond of women,
gambled, ate hearty, drank hearty,
Had known what it was to be flush, grew low-spirited
toward the last, sicken'd, was
help'd by a contribution,
Died, aged forty-one years—and that was his funeral.

This is a realistic portrait of an American working man. The whole of the coachman's life is captured in a few sad lines:

Thumb extended, finger uplifted, apron, cape, gloves,
strap, wet-weather clothes,
whip carefully chosen,
Boss, spotter, starter, hostler, somebody loafing on
you, you loafing on somebody,
headway, man before and man behind,

Good day's work, bad day's work, pet stock, mean
stock, first out, last out, turning-in at night....

Realism is the most important principle in Whitman's love poetry as well. In his works there are no consecutively related tales of the characters' experiences and feelings over a given stretch of time, but in capturing separate moments in the life of his heroes, the author of *Leaves of Grass* reproduces with exceptional psychological faithfulness the most intimate feelings of people in love. He exclaims boldly:

Welcome is every organ and attribute of me, and of any man hearty and clean,
Not an inch nor a particle of an inch is vile, and none shall be less familar than the rest.

How convincingly he portrays the feelings of a lonely young woman who hides "aft the blinds of the window" and watches young men bathing by the shore; and "the homeliest of them is beautiful to her". Not one of the men who splashes "in the water there" knows who stands motionless behind the blind.

An unseen hand ... pass'd over their bodies,
It descended tremblingly from their temples and ribs.

The poet himself said that the distinguishing feature of *Leaves of Grass* was "the absolute & unqualified acceptance of Nature".[1] Whitman proceeded from the conviction that there is an objective reality and its laws have real power. At the same time this revolutionary democrat felt that the forms of life are not established once and for all, but that reality demands action on the part of people. In his book *Whitman and Traubel* W. E. Walling underestimated the importance of Whitman's *emotional drive towards collectivism* and away from individualism, but he was right in saying, "not only was Whitman a rebel but he was a militant rebel and believed in fighting".[2]

Whitman more than once called himself a materialist, though his materialism could not be called consistent. Despite his instinctive attraction towards a materialistic world-view, Whitman at times stated, as did several other American writers, that the spiritual principle finds its fullest expression in religion. In Whitman's poetry and in his *Democratic Vistas*, the terms "religion" and "religiousness" are most often synonymous with spirituality and the ability to love others.

The eminent American Fourierist Albert Brisbane argued strongly for better social institutions and urged people to raise

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[1] *Whitman's Workshop*, p. 150.

[2] W. E. Walling, *Whitman and Traubel*, N. Y., Haskell, 1969, p. 10.

themselves to a higher stage of development, yet at the same time he felt obliged to denounce the atheism of his own father. Whitman never dissociated himself from the anticlerical, essentially atheistic views of Walter Whitman Senior.

In one of his early notes the poet mocks the American churches, saying that they instill parishioners in their comfortable pews with a sense of smugness and self-satisfaction. He called the "great show ... of churches, priests and rituals" "essentially a pretence, a sham".[1]

In another place the author exclaims:

> "the true religious genius of our race now seems to say,
> Beware of churches!
> Beware of priests!"[2]

In many of Whitman's works one can detect the underlying notion that the basis of the religion of which he speaks must be the deification of man, not of some supreme being, some leader or hero, but the man in the street. His notes for lectures on religion contain the following lines:

> *If I build God a church it shall be a church to men and women.*
> *If I write hymns they shall be all to men and women,*
> *If I become a devotee, it shall be to men and women.*[3]

In the poem "Gods" (1870) the poet openly declares: "... perfect Comrade, ... Be thou my God"; "Thou, thou, the Ideal Man,... Be thou my God." Despite the naiveté of some of Whitman's philosophical conclusions, he proceeded from the firm conviction that what people needed was not the church, but the willingness to build their relations on the principle of comradely love.

It was precisely this attempt to deify the man who is capable of "adhesiveness", of selfless love for other people, that is mainly responsible for the mystical motifs in *Leaves of Grass.* The poet places human nature on a pedestal and does obeisance before it, calling this his religion.

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[1] *Whitman's Workshop*, p. 41.
[2] Ibid.
[3] Ibid, p. 43.

Some scholars see an insurmountable contradiction between Whitman's declared intention to portray real life and tell the "truth", and his glorification of the blinding beauty of man, his feeling that "there is nothing in the universe any more divine than man".[1] Here, it seems to them, we have yet another "puzzle". The solution to this "puzzle" was suggested by "Mother Bloor". Whitman, she said, possessed the gift "of revealing to others the beauty of everything around us, the beauty of nature, the beauty of human beings. I feel so often these things that he expresses—his closeness to nature, his great love for mankind, his ecstatic joy in the beauty of the physical world...."[2]

Whitman remained a realist even when reality was hard on him. A remarkable trait of the poet is his constant striving towards the future. The author of *Leaves of Crass* is straining, together with the whole of humanity, towards ever new spiritual heights and new achievements in the conquest of the physical world. "Song of Myself" contains these remarkable lines:

This day before dawn I ascended a hill and look'd
at the crowded heaven,
And I said to mi spirit ***When we become the enfolders***
of those orbs, and the pleasure and
knowledge of every thing in them,
shall we be fill'd and satisfied then?
And my spirit said ***No, we but level that lift to***
pass and continue beyond.

It is important to note that this desire to "pass and continue beyond", this dissatisfaction with what has so far been achieved, is combined in Whitman's mind with a sober awareness of the realities of life. Ultimately the poet's work, whatever its romantic features, is primarily realistic. Whitman's realism, however, is quite unique in several respects. Some of its peculiarities have already been observed. We can discover still others by once again examining "Song of Myself".

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[1] *Whitman's Workshop*, p. 43

[2] E. R. Bloor, *We Are Many*, N. Y., International Publishers, 1940, p. 24.

"Song of Myself"

In the work with the defiant title "Song of Myself", Whitman proclaims himself the chief hero from the very start. Initially the reader is presented with the "everyday" Walt Whitman. For instance, several genuine biographical facts are made known. But it immediately becomes clear that the "I" conceals a man of unusual strength of character and feelings of amazing intensity. His every movement is filled with deep meaning. The hero of the poem is beautiful in both body and spirit. He is a militant democrat.

The Walt Whitman of "Song of Myself" is full of sympathy for all people. Although at times he appears abstract, and even displays indiscriminate attitudes, he is far from indifferent towards good and evil. The basic trait of the poem's hero is a desire to aid others, to lighten their load, to make them strong.

His striving to help people is expressed in the poem in highly vivid images. The poet's "I", it turns out, possesses miracle-working powers:

> *Stop this day and night with me and you shall possess*
> *the origin of all poems,*
> *You shall possess the good of the earth and sun,*
> *tomahawk handle,)*

The first few parts of "Song of Myself" are almost completely devoted to the poet's ego. To be sure, Whitman reminds us even here that what he says about himself is true of others as well. For example, he ascribes to everyone his own bright vision of himself and the world: "Clear and sweet is my soul, and clear and sweet is all that is not my soul." Whitman declares: "I pass death with the dying and birth with the new-wash'd babe...."

Nonetheless, in the beginning the poet is emphatically concerned with himself, his own soul and his own body, and insists on giving an exclusive significance to everything which seems to concern only himself.

> *For me the sweet-heart and the old maid, for me mothers*
> *and the mothers of mothers,*
> *For me lips that have smiled, eyes that have shed tears,*
> *For me children and the begetters of children.*

It might seem that if the lyrical hero of the poem is something more than the author himself, then at best he incarnates merely the general ideal of man, exalted and beautiful. Yet soon the concrete world of contemporary America forces its way into the image of "myself", and the reader sees unfolding before him a picture of everyday reality.

At the same time Whitman remains a lyrical poet. We see life through his consciousness; the mirror before us is the mirror of the poet's own immediate experiences. Nor is he merely an observer, but an active participant in the doings of the world.

"The little one sleeps in its cradle" — these are the opening words of the eighth part of "Song of Myself". Further on the poet says: "I lift the gauze and look a long time, and silently brush away flies with my hand." Then we see a youngster and a girl making their way up a hill, and the poet again speaks of himself, "I peeringly view them from the top." The figure of a suicide appears, sprawled on a bloody floor: "I witness the corpse ... I note where the pistol has fallen." There follow scenes of street life in an American town:

> *The blab of the pave, tires of carts, sluff of boot-soles,*
> *talk of the promenaders,*
> *The heavy omnibus, the driver with his interrogating*
> *thumb, the clank of the shod horses on the*
> *granite floor....*

There is a fight, someone has fallen, a policeman appears.... It would seem at times to be a purely objective narrative, but the lyric poet is still present. After speaking about the "over-fed or half-starv'd", "arrests of criminals" and "adulterous offers", Whitman concludes this part of the poem with the words: "I mind them or the show or resonance of them — I come and I depart."

The poet is always with us in the first person, and it is through him that we become aware of the most diverse phenomena of life. A powerful epic quality pervades the poem. It turns out that "Song of Myself" is "populated" by a multitude of heroes. They are ordinary and quite real Americans, shown in their natural surroundings, under socially determined conditions. Whole pages of the poem are devoted to character studies of the poet's fellow-countrymen,

people of various professions, occupied by the most varied tasks.

Whitman talks about a woman factory worker ("the clean-haired Yankee girl" who "works with her sewing-machine"), about a "paving-man" who "leans on his two-handed rammer", about a "quadroon girl ... sold at the auction-stand", about squatters, "newly-come immigrants". The poet often restricts himself to one- or two-line sketches, but sometimes presents extended descriptions and dramatic episodes. There are memorable realistic scenes, for example, the lyric hero's encounter with a fugitive Negro and the wedding of a trapper to an Indian girl. Whitman describes a Negro coachman, the work of the herdsmen, the torments of the hunted slave; he shows the heroism of firemen.

In the episode of the firemen, as in many other parts of "Song of Myself", "I" stands not only for Whitman, but for completely different persons. The poem's hero changes into another man:

I am the mash'd fireman with breast-bone broken,
Tumbling walls buried me in their debris,
Heat and smoke I inspired, I heard the yelling shouts
of my comrades,
I heard the distant click of their picks and shovels....

Not all these sketches, these poetic "snap-shots", are sufficiently vivid. On occasion the author gives a mere recitation of facts which he has found out from books ("the panther walks to and fro on a limb overhead", and so on). Like other works in *Leaves of Grass*, "Song of Myself" also contains dry enumerations almost devoid of poetic quality.

But most of the time Whitman sees clearly what he is describing and makes the reader feel the authenticity of the pictures presented.

Sometimes a single detail or a striking comparison produces the distinct and vivid impression he wishes to convey.

When the carpenter "dresses his plank, the tongue of his foreplane whistles its wild ascending lisp".

With just a few words the poet creates the image of an exhausted "jour printer with gray head and gaunt jaws":

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He turns his quid of tobacco while his eyes blurr
with the manuscript....

We read about a "lunatic" who is "carried at last to the asylum" and then follows the sad comment:

He will never sleep any more as he did in the cot
in his mother's bedroom....

Tragic and happy events are intermingled in the poem. We see a ball-room with dancers bowing to each other and a youth who becomes aware of the beauty of life. He

... lies awake in the cedar-roof'd garret and harks
to the musical rain....

Then there is a melancholy scene viewed with warm sympathy:

The prostitute draggles her shawl, her bonnet bobs on
her tipsy and pimpled neck,
The crowd laugh at her blackguard oaths, the men jeer
and wink to each other,
(Miserable! I do not laugh at your oaths nor jeer you;)

Everything here is true to life, a mountain of facts and telling details drawn by the artist from the thick of reality. The abstract moral ideas which reigned unchallenged in Whitman's youthful verses have been replaced by concrete events of everyday existence and the psychology of ordinary men and women.

The poet was joyful in his acceptance of the world and considered nothing too low, too unworthy for his art. In comparison with the American poetry being written at the time the picture of life given by Whitman is unusual in its fullness and contrasts of light and shade.

After reading through "Song of Myself" one realizes that the "Walt Whitman" of this poem is not just an individual but a kind of *synthesis of American life,* an artistic mirror which reproduces reality in its various aspects.

It cannot be denied that the image of the lyrical hero in "Song of Myself" is not individualized to the same degree as the central figures of the best novels (in prose or verse) written

by European realists as early as the first half of last century. The image of "Walt Whitman" does not emerge in such concrete, realistic detail as Dickens' characters, for example. Yet this "I" has great realistic significance, since it absorbs many real human qualities and even destinies — now a fugitive slave's, now a trapper's, now a workingwoman's.

In an interview with some newspapermen Whitman was quite outspoken on this subject. He said that while other poets described characters, events and passions outside themselves he had only one central character — the general human personality typified through *himself*.

Naturally this does not only apply to the work we are discussing. In the poem "I Sing the Body Electric" the poet says that he is "at the mother's breast with the little child", he swims "with the swimmers", he marches "in the line with the firemen". And in "Song of the Open Road", the poet reveals the genuine meaning of his "I" when he exclaims:

> *...Still here I carry my old delicious burdens,*
> *I carry them, men and women, I carry them with me*
> *wherever I go,*
> *I swear it is impossible for me to get rid of them,*
> *I am fill'd with them; and I will fill them in return.*

Whitman is quite right when he says in "Song of Myself" that he is weaving this song "of these one and all", that he is part "of old and young, of the foolish as much as the wise ... a child as well as a man":

> *In me the caresser of life wherever moving...*
> *To niches aside and junior bending, not a person or*
> *object missing,*
> *Absorbing all to myself and for this song.*

In the best sections of *Leaves of Grass*, Whitman's hero is presented to the reader as a genuine representative of the masses, "the people en-masse". And so it is quite natural that once he has established this hero's ties with reality, Whitman again and again insists on his, the poet's, community with other human beings:

In all people I see myself, none more and not one a barley-corn less,
And the good or bad I say of myself I say of them.

When Whitman exclaims "I know I am deathless", or "I know I am august", or "one world is aware and by far the largest to me, and that is myself", one cannot but feel that he is not speaking of himself alone, that he not only sees himself in all people, but also feels all people in himself.

The identification of the "Walt Whitman" of "Song of Myself" with his fellow-countrymen, and with people in general ("These are really the thoughts of all men.../If they are not yours as much as mine they are nothing, or next to nothing...") carries a democratic message. Naturally the poet speaks of his identity, not with members of the aristocracies of birth, money or "spirit", but with the working people.

It is no accident that Whitman uses as a symbol of equality the image of grass, which can be seen everywhere. In drawing a parallel between grass and people Whitman by no means denigrates mankind.

The democratic idea of the poet's equality with all working people so strongly expressed in "Song of Myself" has been attacked by quite a few literary critics. Some allege that Whitman ignored quantitative differences and refused to make moral distinctions. According to Gay Allen, the "key to Whitman's attitude is ... *omnes*; he is the poet of *all*—all life, all existence...".[1] In fact, however, in pronouncing his ability to morally reincarnate himself into many other people, the poet was striving to depict not a passionless being with a gift of mimicry, not a cold observer, to whom everything in life is equally "perfect", but a man who lives by the feelings of the people, who is joyful with them, and also *indignant* with them.

In "Song of Myself" the poet gradually reveals more and more facets of his hero's character. Throughout the whole poem "Walt Whitman" continues to undergo transformations. Not only does the author constantly introduce fresh material drawn from life, he also lifts his hero to a higher and higher plane. In the end, the hero of "Song of Myself" rises before the reader as a figure of a fantastic, gigantic stature. He takes on the features of a mythical being, he is now "divine ... inside and

[1] G. W. Allen, *Walt Whitman Handbook*, p. 273.

out" and makes "holy" whatever he touches. He is so great that his palms cover continents:

My ties and ballasts leave me, my elbows rest in sea-gaps,
I skirt sierras, my palms cover continents....

He is stronger than the sun:

Dazzling and tremendous how quick the sun-rise would kill me,
If I could not now and always send sun-rise out of me.

And elsewhere:

Flaunt of the sunshine I need not your bask—lie over!
You light surfaces only, I force surfaces and depths also.

Earth! You seem to look for something at my hands,
Say, old top-knot, what do you want?

The Walt Whitman of "Song of Myself" is even greater than the gods:

The scent of these arm-pits aroma finer than prayer,
This head more than churches, bibles and all the creeds.

Whitman's images become ever more grandiose. The poet takes "the exact dimensions of Jehovah". He embraces millions of worlds. He counts in trillions of years:

We have thus far exhausted trillions of winters and summers,
There are trillions ahead, and trillions ahead of them.

In "Song of Myself" there are many such cosmic images. In order to create the poet "immense have been the preparations":

Cycles ferried my cradle, rowing and rowing like cheerful boatmen,
For room to me stars kept aside in their own rings,
They sent influences to look after what was to hold me.

Before I was born out of my mother generations guided me,
My embryo has never been torpid, nothing could overlay it.

One of the most effective cosmic images in "Song of Myself" has the hero

Speeding through space, speeding through
heaven and the stars,
Speeding amid the seven satellites and
the broad ring, and the diameter
of eighty thousand miles,
Speeding with tail'd meteors, throwing
fire-balls like the rest,
Carrying the crescent child that carries
its own full mother in its belly...

The stanza ends with the following remarkable lines:

I visit the orchards of spheres and
look at the product,
And look at quintillions ripen'd
and look at quintillions green.

But what is this Walt Whitman like, who speeds "with tail'd meteors"? Is he truly some superior being hovering over mankind? Not in the least. In essence the hero has remained the same as at the beginning of the poem. He believes that the exalted is part of the everyday, that it is concealed in the labor of the working people, their conflicts with enemies, in happiness, love, and closeness to nature. The poet equates his own "I" with the sun, not in order to create the heroic out of nothing by the power of fantasy but because he is convinced that the immense and the heroic really exist.

Whitman strives to make the average man understand just how great he really is. In order to achieve his aim the poet resorts to bold hyperboles. The brilliant colors and undoubtedly symbolic "gigantism" all help to reveal the live content of Whitman's poetry, and lend it greater expressiveness.

Of course the contradictions in the hero of "Song of Myself" do not disappear when he assumes the stature of a giant. In this gigantic being, too, one can at times glimpse individualistic tendencies. But this individualism is not basic to the poem's central character.

Through the image of his all-powerful hero Whitman does not assume the vigor of a personality opposed to the people,

but rather the might of the people itself, of the workingmen. For it is the people that are stronger than any powers of nature, it is they who can cover continents with their palms, who penetrate deeper and deeper into the structure of the universe, who have trillions of years ahead.

No matter how much Whitman may have admired the work of Byron and Shelley, in *Leaves of Grass* one cannot find such typical romantic heroes as Satan embodying protest against social evil. Even the fantastic elements in "Song of Myself" express in a hyperbolic form and condensed manner the true essence of Whitman's hero who derives his immense powers from the powers of the people.

In giving his hero universal proportions Whitman is drawing on the traditions of folklore.

During the years when Whitman was writing his "Song of Myself", oral tales describing the unusual and supernatural exploits of Americans in the struggle against nature or their own rivals were very popular in rural America, and to a lesser extent, perhaps, in the towns. Sometimes these tales found their way into print. Most probably the poet, who lived among rank-and-file farm and urban laborers, had heard in his youth (and read in the provincial papers) a great many stories of the doings of various semi-legendary heroes. Quite often these stories were humorous in character. They ridiculed tricksters, braggarts and liars. Because such tales contained many fantastic exaggerations, the wit they represented came to be known as "wild humor" in the United States.

This comic popular style (in particular the penchant for derisory hyperbole) was used most often by Mark Twain. In contrast, Whitman preferred the heroic element of his homeland's folklore. During the poet's youth hyperbolic folk-tales about conquerors of nature and protectors of the oppressed were very popular. In these tales the heroic element is in the foreground, and the comic features play a secondary role or are completely absent. Among the best-known of them are the tales about the lumberjack Paul Bunyan, who could do any job, move mountains and even make new rivers for floating timber.

In "Song of Myself" there are a number of motifs which can be traced to Bunyan stories, or to the folk tales about Davy Crockett, who made short work of the heavenly bodies.

The poet, of course, gives these elements of folk art a new accent. Nor is the wealth of Whitman's poetic images attributable solely to the influence of folklore. "Song of Myself" contains multitudes of brilliant similes, glittering metaphors and impressive images of the most varied kinds.

The poet was well aware of the importance of imagery. He said that "a perfect writer would make words sing, dance, kiss, bear children, weep, bleed, rage, stab ... or do anything that man or woman or the natural powers can do".[1]

The magnificent image at the end of the poem bears the poet out:

I bequeath myself to the dirt to grow from the grass
I love,
If you want me again look for me under your boot-soles.

The originality of Whitman's imagery stands out most clearly, perhaps, in cosmic hyperboles.

In the character of the main hero of "Song of Myself", who is "stucco'd with quadrupeds and birds all over", there is obviously far more fantasy than in Leather Stocking, the central hero of Cooper's famous series of novels, or in Melville's Captain Ahab. Nonetheless, the image of "Walt Whitman" in this poem is more realistic than the image of Ahab. Altogether, *Moby Dick*, which was published just a few years before the appearance of *Leaves of Grass* contains a great deal that is akin to Whitman, but there are important differences.

Whitman undoubtedly shared Melville's hostility towards the accumulators of wealth (in *Moby Dick* one finds, for instance, the ironical comment that possession is "half the law"), and his passionate sympathy for the oppressed Indians, Negroes and other peoples. But the author of *Leaves of Grass* rejected Melville's feeling of the invincibility of evil.

Of course, *Moby Dick* is not made up exclusively of romantic elements. The book contains, for example, a large number of indisputably realistic scenes of life at sea (in some respects anticipating Twain). But Melville the romantic is most sharply in evidence at that juncture where the half-mad Ahab becomes the center of the narrative. One cannot but see in the tragic image of the captain, who evinces certain cosmic tendencies in

[1] W. Whitman, *A Critical Anthology*, 1969, p. 71.

his struggle with the White Whale, a certain affinity with the hero of "Song of Myself". For instance, Ahab exclaims: "Ha, ha, my ship! thou mightest well be taken now for the sea-chariot of the sun. Ho, ho! all ye nations before my prow, I bring the sun to ye! Yoke on the futher billows; hallo! a tandem, I drive the sea!" [1]

And yet the tone of many chapters of *Moby Dick* is quite alien to Whitman. His lyrical hero would not have said, like Melville's Ahab: "Short draughts—long swallows, men; 'tis hot as Satan's hoof...," [2] or: "What a lovely day again! were it a new-made world, and made for a summer-house to the angels, and this morning the first of its throwing open to them, a fairer day could not dawn upon that world," [3] or: "Were I the wind, I'd blow no more on such a wicked, miserable world. I'd crawl somewhere to a cave, and slink there." [4]

Such profusion of romantic imagery was not part of Whitman's way of writing.

Parallels also suggest themselves when we compare the hero of "Song of Myself" and Cooper's Natty Bumppo, with his idolization of nature. Both possess astonishing cheerfulness. But Bumppo is attracted to the world of wild nature, whereas "Walt Whitman" lives the normal life of millions of his fellow citizens. He loves nature, but also accepts civilization. The hero of "Song of Myself" strides through life with giant steps, but he does not strive to avoid people and live alone; he desires to be fused even more closely with them.

While the axe is a symbol of evil for Cooper's hero (in one of his novels, Cooper tells how Bumppo moves still further west in order not to hear how the woods of America are being decimated by axes), Whitman, in "Song of the Broad-Axe", sings of the axe as an object of beauty, a symbol of labor and of the great conquests of civilization. The poem begins with this rhymed hymn to the axe:

Weapon shapely, naked, wan,
Head from the mother's bowels drawn,
Wooded flesh and metal bone, limb
only one and lip only one,

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[1] Herman Melville, *Moby Dick, or the White Whale*, N. Y., Collier, 1962, p. 521.

[2] Ibid., p. 183.

[3] Ibid., p. 565.

[4] Ibid.

Gray-blue leaf by red-heat grown,
helve produced from a little seed sown,
Resting the grass amid and upon,
To be lean'd and to lean on.

It concludes with a vision of "Democracy total" winning the whole earth as the result of civilization's advances.

The poet's outlook rests on the principle of the harmonious synthesis of man's spiritual development with the progress of material civilization.

This makes Whitman's poetry even closer to progressive people today.

I should emphasize once again something which is extremely important if we are to understand Whitman. Some of his writings might give the impression that the poet's works are simply a mirror reflecting nature and human life indiscriminately, that the lyrical hero of "Song of Myself" (and other poems) is faceless and amorphous, incapable of evoking either sympathy or enmity. This view is fairly wide-spread among critics, but without justification. The lyric hero of "Song of Myself", "Song of the Open Road", or "I Sing the Body Electric" possesses the remarkable gift of being reincarnated in various characters, which we see, hear and are *emotionally moved* by.

His lyrical hero becomes our comrade, or (to use Whitman's expression), our lover. Not to see such a hero in *Leaves of Grass*, a hero close and dear to the reader, a "caresser" of life who is tender and infinitely attractive, is to fail to understand Whitman's poetry. Here again the question of Whitman's inherent collectivism arises.

Whitman envisages the future, the "shapes" that "arise", as the kingdom of genuine democracy, as anything but a world of ants where one individual is indistinguishable from another. He emphasizes the *magnificence* of the individual and advocates the right of each personality to exist and to express fully its potentialities. The poet expresses his certainty that a society based on the principle of unification of human beings would be a truly emancipated society, one in which each person could be free to unfold his spiritual wealth to the fullest extent.

A boundless love for people, for comrades and friends is by far the most important distinguishing feature of the lyrical hero of *Leaves of Grass*. This is the foundation of Whitman's originality and his greatness.

PART THREE

DRUM-TAPS

* * *

"Hurrying, Crashing, Sad, Distracted Year"

Almost any man who has lived through a major war and the suffering it entails remembers well the circumstances when he first discovered that blood had been shed. Walt Whitman recounts in *Specimen Days*:

"News of the attack on fort Sumter ... was receiv'd in New York city late at night (13th April, 1861,) and was immediately sent out in extras of the newspapers. I had been to the opera in Fourteenth street that night, and after the performance was walking down Broadway toward twelve o'clock, on my way to Brooklyn, when I heard in the distance the loud cries of the newsboys, who came presently tearing and yelling up the street, rushing from side to side even more furiously than usual. I bought an extra and cross'd to the Metropolitan hotel (Niblo's) where the great lamps were still brightly blazing, and, with a crowd of others, who gather'd impromptu, read the news, which was evidently authentic. For the benefit of some who had no papers, one of us read the telegram aloud, while all listen'd silently and attentively."

Despite Walt Whitman's previous certainty of the inevitability of conflict with the slave owning South, the bloody truth of the war that had just begun had a profound effect on him. In the Whitman family the Civil War caused no arguments. In the household where Louisa Whitman was mistress, the actions of the Southerners roused the deepest indignation. These traitors had not only split off from the Union, not only announced the creation of the Confederacy, but had also shelled Sumter and driven out the troops of the central government.

Not a single member of the family even remotely felt those doubts which tormented the Mississippi riverboat pilot Samuel

Clemens. For this young man brought up in the South it was difficult to make up his mind whom to side with, the South or the North. All the Whitmans were united in their belief that the Southern secessionists, who had dared to attack a fort flying the Stars and Stripes, had to be rebuffed. Their sentiments were shared by tens of thousands of other people living in Brooklyn and New York.

George Whitman, who was young and not yet married, immediately signed up as a volunteer. Like many other soldiers, the poet's brother was convinced that the war would not last long, that the presumptuous slave owners would soon receive their just deserts. Pieces of rope were tied to musket barrels, so that it would be easier to lead the captured Southerners when the soldiers came home victorious.

New York, however, was not one of those northern cities where the overwhelming majority of the inhabitants were united around the new Republican president, Abraham Lincoln. Whitman recalled with a heavy heart the welcome which the future president received in New York somewhat earlier, in February 1861. Lincoln was visiting the city on his way to the capital, where he was to take up his post as president. A great many people came to look at him, but among them, writes the poet, there was not a single friend, and indeed many of them were carrying knives and guns.

The complexity of the situation in the biggest city of the United States during the first period of the war can be judged from what happened there two years later. When the Washington government could no longer hope to defeat the Southerners with volunteer forces and introduced mobilization massive disturbances broke out in New York.

Taking advantage of the ignorance of some strata of the population (especially, poor Irish immigrants), southern agents incited them against the Negroes. They led the rioters to believe that if the black slaves in the South were freed, they would flood northward and squeeze the whites out of their jobs. The thousands of casualties (two thousand were killed), included a large proportion of Negroes.

At the time of the riots Whitman was already living in the capital. Putting little faith in the information published in the newspapers (his brother Jeff had written and warned him that the newspapers were giving a false impression of the riot), the poet at first refused to share the anger against New York which

had gripped many Washingtonians. But about a month later, Whitman wrote home that now that he knew more about the riot he condemned it outright.

In one of his letters the poet compared the horrific treatment of the poor Negroes by the New York mob with the monstrosities perpetrated by the Southerners against the supporters of the Union living in the South. It is sufficient to read his letter to comprehend how much this kind man hated the planters.

The poet describes to his mother the tortures inflicted in the South on the farmer John Barker. (Whitman had met him in a hospital in Washington.) Despite his southern origins, Barker had refused to fight on the side of the slave owners. For a long time he was "a prisoner in secesh prisons in Georgia, & in Richmond—three times the devils hung him up by the heels to make him promise to give up his unionism, once he was cut down for dead ... his little property destroyed, his wife & child turned out—he hunted & tormented ... but he was firm as a rock—he would not even take an oath to not fight for either side—they held him about 8 months—then he was very sick, scurvy, & they exchanged him...—his whole thought was to get back & fight.... I asked him once very gravely why he didn't take the southern oath & get his liberty—if he didn't think foolish to be so stiff &—I never saw such a look as he gave me, he thought I was in earnest...." [1] The war which began in April 1861 was a genuinely *civil* war. It was supposed to be a war between the North and the South. But as a matter of fact every American, irrespective of where he had been born and where he lived had to decide for himself who were his comrades, and who—his enemies. Art Shields, an outstanding figure in the American labor press of our time proudly related to the author of this book how his own grandfather, a tenant farmer from North Carolina, was mobilized into the army of the South, but not wishing to fight for slave owners, feigned extreme illness.

The line which divided one camp from the other passed through both the northern and the southern states. It often divided families.

The most consistent opponents of the southern slave owners were the working people. Thinking over the reasons for the

[1] W. Whitman, *The Correspondence*, Vol. I, p. 147.

serious setbacks initially suffered by the Federal Government, Whitman drew a sharp contrast between the rank-and-file soldiers and their officers. He blamed the officers for the serious defeat at Bull Run in July 1861.

Addressing those who were not "half or one-tenth worthy" of their men, the writer exclaims in his book *Specimen Days*: "... never tell me of chances of battle, of getting stray'd, and the like. I think this is your work, this retreat, after all. Sneak, blow, put on airs there in Willard's sumptuous parlors and barrooms, or anywhere—no explanation shall save you." In those joyless days the poet did not betray his faith in the average American, in the soldiers who, needless to say, were not welcomed to the "sumptuous parlors".

Tired to the point of exhaustion after their long retreat, they were sleeping somewhere "on the steps of houses, up close by the basements or fences, on the sidewalk, aside on some vacant lot".

The Civil War made Whitman think that the American army had to be reorganized in a revolutionary way, on a democratic basis. "Our national military system," he wrote to one of his friends in late 1863, "needs shifting, revolutionizing & made to tally with democracy, the people — The officers should almost invariably rise from the ranks—there is an absolute want of democratic spirit in the present system & officers—it is the feudal spirit exclusively."[1] It is significant that the first poems written by Whitman during the war were addressed, not to the prosperous, well-dressed Americans of high society, but to the ordinary people, to those who formed the core of the Union army.

In Whitman's famous poem "Beat! Beat! Drums!" the drums and the bugles call the farmers and city dwellers to leave their peaceful occupations. Time does not permit "parley" and "expostulation".

Mind not the timid — mind not the weeper or prayer...
Let not the child's voice be heard....

New rhythms appear in this poem: the rhythms of the march, the rhythms of war. The poet who always avoided "dainty rhymes or sentimental love verses" now denounces even more sharply the "lisping" of "some pale poetling".

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[1] W. Whitman, *The Correspondence*, Vol. I, p. 171.

"Eighteen Sixty-One" is one of the most remarkable of Whitman's wartime works. The first year of the war, that "hurrying, crashing, sad, distracted year" stands before us as "a strong man erect". He is a workingman, a farmer, a man "in blue clothes", a soldier in the Northern army. The poet addresses his hero:

Amid the men of Manhattan I saw you as one of the
workmen, the dwellers in Manhattan,
Or with large steps crossing the prairies out of Illinois
and Indiana,
Rapidly crossing the West with springy gait and descending
the Alleghanies,
Or down from the great lakes or in Pennsylvania, or on
deck along the Ohio river,
Or southward along the Tennessee or Cumberland rivers,
or at Chattanooga on the mountain top,
Saw I your gait and saw I your sinewy limbs clothed in blue,
bearing weapons, robust year....

The year 1861 had "sunburnt face and hands", its "masculine voice" suddenly "sang by the mouths of the round-lipp'd cannon".

Longfellow, Bryant, Lowell, Whittier, "John Brown's Body"

A great many American poets responded to the events of the war in their work. Longfellow sang of the Northerners' cause in a number of poems. In "The Cumberland" there is a romantically tinted description of the courage of a captain and his sailors who have engaged a more powerful vessel of the arrogant planters and prefer death to the shame of surrendering themselves to the enemy's mercy.

Longfellow's romantic leanings are even more evident in the poem "Killed at the Ford". At the same time as a fatal bullet strikes the soldier, his beloved likewise is dying.

The poet also makes cogent remarks on the historical events of his day in his poem dedicated to the memory of Charles Sumner, one of Lincoln's most radical supporters. Longfellow's personal acquaintance with Sumner gave him a

true appreciation of the cause to which this progressive fighter against the planters' oligarchy had dedicated himself.

His was the troubled life,
The conflict and the pain,
The grief, the bitterness of strife,
The honor without stain.

Though Sumner is a "quenched" star, the poet says, still its light will shine for ages.

So when a great man dies,
For years beyond our ken,
The light he leaves behind him lies
Upon the paths of men.[1]

The poet and prose writer Oliver Wendell Holmes, who is known in the United States mainly for his humorous works, also put his pen at the service of the Northern cause. But his marching songs are not distinguished for depth of thought and feeling.

Prior to the Civil War, Bryant wrote few poems bearing directly on the struggle against slavery. The American critic Samuel Sillen's explanation is that Bryant "was expressing himself day in and day out in his impassioned editorial columns".[2]

Bryant continued to write these editorial columns during the war, too. In one article he rapturously greeted Lincoln's decision to free the Negroes. This decision, wrote Bryant, "brings us back to our traditions". American soldiers, continued Bryant, "are fighting today, as the Revolutionary patriots fought, in the interest of the human race, for human rights...".[3]

And yet the poet did not restrict himself to newspaper articles in expressing his sympathy for the Northern cause. He also wrote an excellent series of poems about the war. In

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[1] *The Poems of H. W. Longfellow*, p. 261.

[2] W. C. Bryant, *Selections from His Poetry and Prose*, Ed. by S. Sillen, N. Y., International Publishers, 1945, p. 20.

[3] Ibid., p. 27.

"Our Country's Call" Bryant addresses his fellow-citizens (as Whitman did) calling on them to lay down the axe, fling aside the spade, leave "the toiling plough", and march to war.

The working people, he said, must join the army of the North. The conclusion of the poem expresses the hope that "Might" and "Right" will, through concerted effort, bring about victory. Bryant's use of abstract categories to express the thoughts and feelings of his fellow-citizens shows how close he was to the traditions of classical poetry, which was certainly not true of the author of *Leaves of Grass*.

Lowell also produced several works which reveal the influence of classical poetics. But he appeared as a completely different poet in the second series of "The Biglow Papers", written during the war. Once again, like the ill-reputed "vulgar" humorists of the New England newspapers, he boldly reproduces the dialect of the village "Yankees". Once again we find at the center of "The Biglow Papers" truthful pictures of provincial life and realistic satire condemning both the slave owning Confederacy and its secret friends in the North. For instance, the president of the Confederacy boastfully declares:

> *We've a war, an' a debt, an' a flag; an' ef this*
> *Ain't to be inderpendunt, why, wut on airth is?*[1]

When he mentions those who are for making peace with the planters, the hero of the poem, Biglow, utters the warning, "Conciliate? it jest means *be kicked.*"[2] Lowell also attacks those northern generals who neither knew nor wished to know how to fight properly, yet demanded more and more soldiers. The poet mockingly remarks:

> *Wut use in addin' to the tail,*
> *When it's the head's in need o'strengthenin'?*[3]

Whittier's wartime poetry fully reflects the contradictions in the character of a poet who was both a militant abolitionist and

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[1] J. R. Lowell, *The Poetical Works*, Boston and N. Y., Vol. II, Houghton Mifflin, 1890, p. 303.

[2] Ibid., p. 348.

[3] Ibid.

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a Quaker. Although Whittier seems to have remained a pacifist during the war, the need to crush the planters was expressed more and more frequently in his poetry. The author's organic sympathy for the northern cause was obvious in his ballad "Barbara Frietchie", which relates how an old woman threw a bold challenge to the Southerners who had seized her home town.

In the North the Civil War called forth not only a series of splendid poems by Emerson and Bryant, the second part of "The Biglow Papers", and some excellent works by Whittier, but also a number of outstanding popular songs. One of them has engraved itself in the hearts of millions of Americans. It is "John Brown's Body". Its unknown author speaks forcefully about the noble feats of the great abolitionist John Brown, starting his song with the following immortal lines:

John Brown's body lies a-mouldering in the grave...
His soul is marching on!

"Manly Love"

The war grew into a drawn-out and stubborn struggle. And all the time Whitman was writing new poems; about coachmen abandoning their work to go to war, about "mechanics arming". Time and again he called on the Northerners not to give way to the enemy.

Most of his wartime poems, however, did not appear in print until the war was over. With the exception of a few isolated poems, Whitman's patriotic poetry did not reach his fellow-countrymen while the Civil War was on. Strangers who met Walt Whitman during the first year and a half of the war thought,with some justification, that they saw not a poet, but a journalist. Just a journalist....

During these stormy years Whitman once again could find no publisher for his verses, and again he felt himself to be an outcast in poetry.

Carpentry had already grown too onerous for Whitman, now in his forties. He had to earn his living in some other way.

The poet once told some friends that he was only working for the press to make some money. Whitman's newspaper articles during the war years were written honestly, in good

conscience, and included some fairly interesting sketches. Just the same, this work was designed almost solely to meet the cost of room and board. The author did not put all of himself into it, as he had done during his last year on the Brooklyn *Eagle* or while he worked on the *Brooklyn Freeman.* Whitman simply could not afford to refuse the six or seven dollars a week which, according to a contemporary, was what he received for his articles.

But from the very start of the war, the poet served "the soldiers in blue" not only with his poems (which for the most part, alas, remained in his desk drawer). He began to visit systematically the hospitals for the soldiers of the Northern army.

Since before the war, Whitman had been in the habit of visiting people in the hospital, even those he did not know well.

When the war started, Whitman's visits to the hospitals grew more and more frequent. He helped to bandage the wounded, he wrote letters to their families, he brought the soldiers good things to eat, sat up through the night with dying men, quietly chatted with a youth who was feeling homesick and cheered him up by giving him faith in his own recovery.

The poem "The Wound-Dresser" tells the story of an old man doctoring the body and the soul of wounded young people. Undoubtedly the image is autobiographical.

"The Wound-Dresser" binds up crushed heads, washes away "the matter and blood", bandages wounds. But he does something even more difficult and important:

The hurt and wounded I pacify with soothing hand,
I sit by the restless all the dark night....
(Many a soldier's loving arms about this neck have
cross'd and rested,
Many a soldier's kiss dwells on these bearded lips.)

What Whitman said in *Leaves of Grass* about the magnificence of "manly love" and the beautiful feeling of comradeship, without which human happiness is impossible, was a reflection of the demands of his own nature and was born of the organic needs of his own spirit. This became particularly clear to the poet himself during the hard years of war.

On his visits to the hospitals, Whitman met hundreds of people with whom he developed ties of mutual understanding and brotherhood. The depth of feeling which the poet displayed is astounding. It was not only that sick soldiers far away from their families found during these particularly difficult weeks and months of their lives a genuinely compassionate and conscientious nurse in the bearded "wound-dresser". Whitman aroused in the souls of his young comrades exalted and noble feelings which they had never suspected could exist.

About a year after the beginning of the war the poet related simply and with great discretion the story of a Sunday evening spent in a hospital with seven young convalescing soldiers from a Maine regiment. It was a farewell meeting on the eve of their return to their regiment, and everybody felt that it was like the parting of old friends.

During the war the purity of the emotions which bound Whitman to the sick in the hospitals became still more evident. It might have seemed that the exalted character of the poet's hymns in praise of friendship between people was obvious enough. But in recent years critics of a Freudian bent have written hundreds of pages airing their fanciful ideas concerning the conscious or unconscious homosexual nature of Whitman's yearning for "manly love". And so I feel I have to say more about this.

It is true that the author of *Leaves of Grass* celebrated not only the love for a woman, the subject of innumerable works by thousands of poets, but also "manly love". It is true that he called his friends "lovers". It is true that he did not speak of comradely love in abstract or commonplace terms, but in words palpitating with tenderness. The poet was capable of comradely feelings of rare intensity.

The first reading of "A Song for Occupations" began like this:

> *Come closer to me,*
> *Push close my lovers and take the best I possess,*
> *Yield closer and closer and give me the best you possess.*[1]

But it is "A Song for Occupations" which demonstrates more clearly than any other of Whitman's works that the poet's

[1] W. Whitman, *Leaves of Grass*, 1928, p. 621.

call to his "lovers" to "yield closer" has a social character. At the center of the poem stand "Workmen and Workwomen", mechanics and farmers. The author demands equality for all and affirms the worth of every working man. ("Is it you that thought the President greater than you?").

And this feeling of the magnificence of every person engaged in useful work, of every member of the human race, he expresses in a form which may be unusual and ecstatic, but is unquestionably noble and extremely expressive: the image of people "in love" with each other.

Addressing the reader, the poet exclaims: "... I am in love with You, and"—a highly significant addition—"with all my fellows upon the earth."

Emerson, who was obviously shocked by what he saw as an excessively open treatment of love between man and woman in Whitman's works, saw nothing shameful in his poems about "manly love". At times Emerson himself called his comrades "lovers".

Whitman made more friends in the hospitals of Washington than anywhere else, and he expressed his love for these soldier-friends in a large number of poems and letters. Before discussing them, however, let us see how the poet happened to find himself in the capital of the United States.

"Bold, Cautious, True, and My Loving Comrade"

When, at the end of 1862, letters ceased to arrive from George Whitman and an announcement appeared in the newspapers that a man with a somewhat similarly sounding name from a New York regiment had been wounded, Walt undertook to find his brother and nurse him back to health.

Up to that time George Whitman had been lucky; he had taken part in many battles, and acquitted himself honorably; he had been promoted rapidly, but now his luck had turned.

Walt Whitman decided to set out for the front. His intention was to find his brother, and if he were wounded or ill, to stay with him until he was well. The poet took some money from the family savings and went from New York to Philadelphia,

and from there to Washington. He knew that George's regiment was somewhere not far from the capital.

At first Walt Whitman was dogged by bad luck. His money was stolen and he was left penniless. His efforts to find George in the Washington hospitals led to nothing, and he also failed to discover anything about his brother from official sources. A little later, however, things began to look more promising. He found out that George was alive. Walt Whitman was to be lucky in other respects as well.

At the beginning of his stay in Washington he ran into William O'Connor on the street. Whitman's first meeting with O'Connor, which had taken place a year before the war, had not promised any close friendship. (The author of *Leaves of Grass* was occupied with reading the proofs of the third edition of his book. O'Connor had his own affairs as a writer to attend to—the same firm, "Thayer and Eldridge", was preparing to publish his abolitionist novel *Harrington*, characterized by Whitman as "eloquent and fiery".) In Boston each writer was going his own solitary way. But in Washington Whitman and O'Connor quickly developed a liking for each other.

William O'Connor is known in the history of American literature mainly for his works on Whitman. He certainly was one of the most informed and thoughtful American writers of the second half of the nineteenth century.

Having once aligned himself with the abolitionist cause he remained a consistent abolitionist all his life. In a preface to a posthumously published volume of essays and tales by O'Connor, Whitman described his friend as "a gallant, handsome, gay-hearted, fine-voiced, glowing-eyed man".

One could describe O'Connor as the living incarnation of Whitman's hero. Quick, passionate, talented, steadfastly freedom-loving, fearless in defending his political and literary views, unshakeable in his convictions, he lived an interesting and genuinely beautiful life.

O'Connor's major theme and passion as a critic was the defense of progressive writers in the United States and other countries against the attacks of American authors who were either prudes or acknowledged reactionaries. Whitman recalled how decisively his friend had lauded such "doubtful" writers as Byron, Hugo, George Sand, Burns, Poe, and Rabelais. The poet himself was indebted to O'Connor for

dissuading him of his long-held narrow view of Shakespeare as a convinced supporter and poet of feudalism.

O'Connor often helped Whitman out at difficult moments. He was, wrote the poet, "my dear, dear friend, and staunch (probably my staunchest) literary believer and champion from the first, and throughout without halt or demur, for twenty-five years".

Whitman was glad at his chance meeting with O'Connor in the capital. O'Connor loaned the poet some money and helped him to find a place to stay. William O'Connor's wife Nelly also became Whitman's faithful friend; dozens of his letters are addressed to her.

It was possibly the O'Connors who suggested to Whitman the idea of making his way to the district where George was serving. Another acquaintance whom Whitman met in Washington, Charles Eldridge (a former member of the publishing firm "Thayer and Eldridge") obtained a pass permitting Whitman to visit the front.

Apart from the O'Connor family and Eldridge, the poet also acquired other friends at this time. John Burroughs (then a junior clerk in one of Washington's administrative institutions, and later a famous ornithologist and talented writer) became very close to the poet.

Burroughs wrote that the more he saw of Walt Whitman, the more he liked him. From the very beginning the poet impressed Burroughs as a person who "was so sound and sweet and gentle and attractive asa man, and withal so wise and tolerant" that he "soon came to feel the same confidence in the book" that he "at once placed in its author".[1]

With the help of his friends the poet soon found George. His brother really had been wounded, but only very slightly, and had not left his regiment.

The poet first cabled his family that George had been found and was in good health. In a long letter to his mother (written in late December, 1862), Whitman did his best to reassure her, saying that George was "well in health", and had "a good appetite". When the poet saw his brother, all his "little cares and difficulties ... vanished into nothing".[2]

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[1] J. Burroughs, *The Writings*, Vol. X, Boston and N. Y., Houghton, Mifflin, 1904, p. 6.

[2] W. Whitman, *The Correspondence*, Vol. I, p. 59.

There followed a description of George's friends, who were ready to do anything for him, and finally the poet mentioned that he would not mind finding himself some kind of work to do.

He decided, probably again at O'Connor's suggestion, to try and find a job in the capital. The letter to his mother was sent off when he returned to Washington. On the same day he directed a message to Emerson with a request for references.

Whitman never made such confessions as he did in this letter. He wrote of his "harsh and superb plight" and wretched poverty and how he wanted to apply for a job "direct at headquarters" in Washington, since one had to "have an income".[1] The poet characterized his recent life in New York with one word — stagnation. Essentially Whitman admitted here that for many years he had been earning his living by odd jobs, never knowing what tomorrow would bring. How was he to support his mother? How was he to support his sick brother?

Just a few words were said in the letter in reference to the events of the previous week, which he had spent in George's regiment. Whitman only mentioned that he had wandered around the camp and seen active fighting; but a great deal is hidden behind these terse words. The days spent at the front eventually bore fruit in the shape of several of the best of Whitman's wartime poems.

From Walt Whitman's letters and the memoirs of people close to him we know that he took part in burying the dead who were left lying on the field of battle and saw the sufferings of the wounded, for whom there was not enough room in the hospitals (it was December, the ground was frozen, there were not enough bunks, and blankets served as mattresses). A few times he went out with scouts, and one morning as he came out of his tent he all but stumbled on the bodies of soldiers who had just died.

What he had seen, felt and suffered gave birth to poems. We do not know when most of Whitman's wartime works were written. He was not in the habit of dating them and they were almost all published only after the war, in the book *Drum-Taps* (1865). But it is apparent that already at the beginning of 1863 poetry began to flow from Whitman's pen unlike anything that he had written during the earlier stage of the war.

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[1] W. Whitman, *The Correspondence*, Vol. 1, p. 59.

Even those poems which were produced at the beginning of the Civil War differed sharply from his pre-war work. Immediately after the attack on Fort Sumter, new heroes appeared in his poetry. Now the poet rarely assumes the characteristics of other people. In several of his poems there appear symbolic images of sweeping scope. Such are the images of the city of New York, of "Manna-hatta", of the "terrible drums", of the soldier "clothed in blue".

"Beat! Beat! Drums!", "Eighteen Sixty-One" and other poems imbued with the indomitable desire for victory over the slave owners, show particularly clearly Whitman's closeness to revolutionary English romantic poetry, to the works of Byron and Shelley. At the same time the works Whitman included in *Drum-Taps*, the collection of poetry written during the war, evince far more of an epic strain than his pre-war poetry.

The poem "Song of the Banner at Daybreak" contains the romantic image of a "Child" who represents humanity, a "Child" for whom ideals are superior to material interests. This "Child" does not care for money. Above all he loves "the banner"—the symbol of the struggle for exalted aims: "That pennant I would be and must be."

In the final section of the poem, its other character, the "Poet", who expresses Whitman's views, says:

My limbs, my veins dilate, my theme is clear at last,
Banner so broad advancing out of the night, I sing you
haughty and resolute....
O banner, not money so precious are you, not farm produce
you, nor the material good nutriment,
Nor excellent stores, nor landed on wharves from the ships,
Not the superb ships with sail-power or steam-power,
fetching and carrying cargoes,
Nor machinery, vehicles, trade, nor revenues—but you
as henceforth I see you....
I see but you, O warlike pennant!...
Flapping up there in the wind.

At the same time, however, Whitman describes the everyday life of industrial America with great warmth.

The poem "First O Songs for a Prelude" depicts, with great emotional strength yet with realistic accuracy, the departure of soldiers for the front and the "tearful parting" mothers take of their sons. This scene is followed by the image of cannons which will soon break their silence to commence their "red business".

Although even here, in the works written during the war, there is a romantic cast to Whitman's poetry, realistic tendencies are considerably stronger. It is significant that Whitman consistently opposed the typical romantic tendency to emphasize the superiority of nature over the city and over civilization in general.

While many of Whitman's precursors exhibited a distrust for the big city, depicting it as a concentration of everything repulsive and foul, almost a symbol of evil, Whitman, in his *Drum-Taps*, describes it with love. In the towns there live thousands of freedom-loving Americans, ready to go to battle against the slave owning South. In these very towns man's magnificence is strikingly obvious.

In the poem "Give Me the Splendid Silent Sun" the poet sings of nature, the "splendid" sun, autumn orchards bursting with the juice of ripe fruits, fields where the "unmow'd grass grows", and then says that there is something even more beautiful, even more satisfying. This is the city, where the crowds move endlessly along the pavements. Further on Whitman speaks ecstatically of the soldiers who march through the streets of Manhattan en route to the front. He exclaims:

> *Manhattan crowds, with their turbulent musical chorus!*
> *Manhattan faces and eyes forever for me.*

The same idea of the superiority of the big city over nature is found in the poem "Rise O Days From Your Fathomless Deeps" and in several others written during the war.

And so, at the onset of hostilities the most prominent motifs in Whitman's poetry were more or less directly linked with the call to fight for democratic freedoms. Later the poet's work more and more often reflects the terrible everyday realities of a bloody war. The poet sees tired soldiers and men wounded and dying.

But he does not forget the magnificence of the cause defended by the soldiers "clothed in blue". Though immersed

in a world of suffering, he does not ignore the difference between the North and the South or depict the men of both camps as victims of a senseless fratricidal war.

This is particularly important if only because many American literary critics represent Whitman as a man who declared his neutrality during the war. For instance, in *The Cambridge History of American Literature* we read that "Whitman had written not a few vivid descriptions of war scenes, and he stands alone among all the poets of his time in his noble freedom from partisanship...".[1]

In actual fact, all of Whitman's work of the war years breathed hatred for slavery; and not only did the poet retain that hatred, but in the final period of the war he realized more fully than ever before the greatness of Lincoln and the nobility of his cause.

In several poems which were probably written after his move to Washington, Whitman speaks of "crowds, groups of forms" on the floor and "death-spasm". But he did not restrict himself to the horrors of war. Even in the most tragic scenes one always senses the poet's awareness of man's might and heroism. Never before had Whitman expressed with such simplicity and power his feelings, his perturbation and shock.

In the poem "Vigil Strange I Kept on the Field One Night" we find the image of a brave soldier who has perished in battle, the image of "my son and my comrade".

Vigil wondrous and vigil sweet there in the fragrant
silent night,
But not a tear fell, not even a long-drawn sigh, long,
long I gazed,
Then on the earth partially reclining sat by your side
leaning my chin in my hands,
Passing sweet hours, immortal and mystic hours with you
dearest comrade — not a tear, not a word,
Vigil of silence, love and death, vigil for you my son
and my soldier....

The body of the dead soldier, "bathed by the rising sun" comes to symbolize immortality of a life which has been illuminated by a heroic deed.

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[1] *The Cambridge History of American Literature*, Vol. II, N. Y., Macmillan, 1944, p. 286.

As almost everywhere in Whitman's poetry, the heroic is seen through the eyes of a lyric poet. There is sensitive lyricism, for instance, in the inscription on the tomb of the soldier who has been buried somewhere in the woods of Virginia, *Bold, cautious, true, and my loving comrade* (in the poem "As Toilsome I Wander'd Virginia's Woods").

The poem "Come Up from the Field Father" tells us of a youthful farmer called Pete who gave his life to assure the North's victory. (Calling a hero by name is very unusual for the poet; apart from "Walt Whitman" there are almost no named heroes in *Leaves of Grass.*) Just a few words demonstrate the heroism of the dying youth — to the very end he hides from his mother the hopelessness of his position.

The bitter sadness of the occurrence is conveyed mainly through the image of Pete's inconsolable mother. With the agony of a son the poet exlaims,

Ah now the single figure to me,
Amid all teeming and wealthy Ohio with all its cities
and farms,
Sickly white in the face and dull in the head, very faint,
By the jamb of a door leans....
In the midnight waking, weeping, longing with one deep
longing,
O that she might withdraw unnoticed, silent from life
escape and withdraw,
To follow, to seek, to be with her dear dead son.

"A Sight in Camp in the Daybreak Gray and Dim", "A March in the Ranks Hard-Prest, And the Road Unknown", "By the Bivouac's Fitful Flame" and other poems convey the epic story of the Civil War with ruthless accuracy. They are the clearest possible testimony to the deepening realism of Whitman's poetry.

"The Most Important Something in the World"

Meanwhile, with Eldridge's assistance Whitman found work as a copyist of documents in Washington. Emerson sent the requested recommendations. One of them was addressed to

the Secretary of Treasury, Salmon Chase, but Whitman could not muster the courage to go to him. Another writer had arrived in Washington, one to whom Whitman had been introduced during his memorable stay in Boston before the war. He was John Trowbridge, and he had been brought to the capital and commissioned to write Chase's official biography for the next elections, since this rich Republican from New England dreamed of taking over the post of president after Lincoln. This provided a good opportunity to deliver Emerson's letter to Chase. Trowbridge willingly undertook the errand. It is to him, too, that we owe a description of the poet's daily life in Washington.

The houses in which Chase and Whitman lived were on the same street, not far from each other. Chase's residence, as Trowbridge relates, was a large and beautiful mansion, luxuriously appointed. He was waited on by skilful, silent Negro servants. Whitman lived alone in an old lodging house, in a gloomy, empty room in the garret, with a dark staircase as the only means of access. The furniture consisted of a bed, a pinewood table and a small iron stove.

Trowbridge visited the poet in December, but the stove in the room was not burning. Whitman's household property consisted of a bowl, a teapot, a tin mug and a spoon. The poet's circumstances were now even more difficult than before. He not only had to provide for himself and help his mother and brother Eddy, but also felt obliged to take at least some small gift to the soldiers in the hospitals every day.

In several letters to Louisa Whitman he spoke again of becoming a travelling orator. "Mother, I think something of commencing a series of lectures & readings & c. through different cities of the north, to supply myself with funds for my Hospital and Soldiers visits."[1] Once again these plans came to nothing.

In his letter to Chase, Emerson described Whitman as "a man of strong original genius". True, he continued, the poet had "marked eccentricities", but he was a "large hearted man, much beloved by his friends; entirely patriotic & benevolent in his theory, tastes, & practice. If his writings are in certain points open to criticism, they yet show extraordinary power, &

[1] W. Whitman, *The Correspondence*, Vol. I, p. 109.

are more deeply American, democratic, & in the interest of political liberty, than those of any other poet."[1]

All these kind words produced no impression on Secretary Chase. Trowbridge handed him Emerson's letter, the latter read it through carefully, and refused to help Whitman in any way whatsoever. The poet had a bad reputation, and Chase was not affected by assurances that Whitman was a gentleman, and not at all the New York vagabond many imagined him to be.

Despairing of making any progress, Trowbridge asked Chase to return the letter. Chase replied: "I have nothing of Emerson's in his handwriting, and I shall be glad to keep this."[2] When Trowbridge told Whitman about the conversation, the latter laughed and said, "I don't blame him; it's about what I expected."[3]

From his minute income the poet managed to set aside money to buy sweets, writing paper and tobacco for the sick and wounded soldiers. Several friends and acquaintances began to send Whitman sums of money to buy presents for the soldiers.

The hospitals in Washington served the front lines. Almost every day distant gunfire could be heard in the capital. Many of the soldiers whom Whitman visited had only just left the firing line, and some of them would have to return there directly.

In one of his newspaper articles Whitman wrote that after any large battle, hundreds of youths were left lying without any help, mutilated, almost unconscious, alone, some bleeding profusely or dying of exhaustion. When the sick and wounded found themselves in the hospital, mental suffering compounded the physical. Few people bothered to say a gentle word to these country youths who had left their families for the first time in their lives (among the soldiers there were a large number of simple farm lads). Few people bothered to comfort and calm them during those terrible minutes, hours, and days when they were struggling with death.

The pages of Whitman's numerous wartime letters are alive with heart-rending sympathy, whether written to his mother, his relatives, his friends or to strangers. "O, my dear sister,"

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[1] Walt Whitman, *The Correspondence*, Vol. I, pp. 65-66.

[2] *The Shock of Recognition*, p. 275.

[3] Ibid., p. 276.

wrote the poet to his brother's wife, "how your heart would ache to go through the rows of wounded young men, as I did.... One young man was very much prostrated, and groaning with pain. I stopt and tried to comfort him. He was very sick. I found he had not had any medical attention since he was brought there — among so many he had been overlooked."[1]

"I never before had my feelings so thoroughly ... absorbed, to the very roots, as by these huge swarms of dear, wounded, sick, dying boys — I get very much attached to some of them, and many of them have come to depend on seeing me, and having me sit by them a few minutes, as if for their lives,"[2] wrote the poet to his brother Jeff. "Mother, if you or Mat (Whitman's sister-in-law.— *M. M.*) was here a couple of days, you would cry your eyes out. I find I have to restrain myself and keep my composure...."[3]

Here is a passage from another letter to his mother — about the soldier John Elliott who had no kin or friends in Washington (he died on the operating table): "... Mother, such things are awful — not a soul here he knew or cared about, except me.... Mother, how contemptible all the usual little wordly prides & vanities & striving after appearances, seems in the midst of such scenes as these — such tragedies of soul & body".[4]

To the bed-ridden soldiers he brought sugar, tea and fruit, and provided them with books and paper. Religious philanthropical societies refused to give the wounded tobacco (since smoking was a "sin"). But Whitman unfailingly brought the smokers tobacco and cigarettes. Before supper he would often go round the wards with a jar of jam or some other sweet and leave each of them a spoon or two.

The most important thing which the maimed young men needed was to have someone take an interest in them and to feel some human warmth. The poet radiated sympathy, tenderness and friendship every hour of the day.

A well-known correspondent, according to J. Burroughs (most likely he had John Swinton in mind), thus described a

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[1] W. Whitman, *The Correspondence*, Vol. I, p. 63.
[2] Ibid., p. 77.
[3] Ibid., p. 90.
[4] Ibid., p. 100.

visit with Walt Whitman to one of the Washington hospitals: "Never shall I forget one night when I accompanied him on his rounds through a hospital.... When he appeared, in passing along, there was a smile of affection and welcome on every face ... and his presence seemed to light up the place.... From cot to cot they called him ... they embraced him; they touched his hand; they gazed at him.... He did the things for them no nurse or doctor could do ... and, as he took his way towards the door, you could hear the voices of many a stricken hero calling 'Walt, Walt, Walt! come again! come again!'"[1]

Those of the sick and wounded who survived remembered him for a very long time. Almost ten years after the war ended Whitman received a warmly written letter from William Stansberry, one of the young men whom he had helped in the Washington hospitals. The poet was greatly moved. He replied to Stansberry: "To think that the little gift & word of kindness, should be remembered by you so long.... Dear Comrade—you do me good, by your loving wishes & feelings to me in your letters."[2]

Perhaps the most moving of Whitman's wartime letters are those in which he tells the families of the last hours of their sons and brothers. The poet began a letter to a Mr. and Mrs. Haskell with these words: "Dear friends, I thought it would be soothing to you to have a few lines about the last days of your son Erastus.... I write in haste, & nothing of importance—only I thought any thing about Erastus would be welcome."[3]

There follows a fairly long, detailed story of the young soldier's death. He was not talkative, and he had difficulty in breathing, but sometimes he would wake from a heavy sleep and stretch out his arm to the stranger sitting next to him. "... Many nights I sat in the hospital by his bedside till far in the night—The lights would be put out—yet I would sit there silently...—he always liked to have me sit there, but never cared to talk...."[4]

During his life in the hospitals (Whitman practically did live there, spending every evening and many hours of the night within the hospital walls), the poet made a lot of friends, with

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[1] J. Burroughs, op. cit., Vol. X, pp. 47-48.
[2] W. Whitman, *The Correspondence*, Vol. II, p. 299.
[3] Ibid., Vol. I, p. 127.
[4] Ibid., p. 129.

whom he later maintained correspondence for many years. They were simple people, farmers more often than not, and occasionally workers. Whitman treated them like a comrade, like a father or elder brother. He himself accurately defined his relationship with these youths (most of them were mere boys) when he remarked that he often felt very close to them, as if they were his own children or younger brothers.

Usually the soldiers did not have the slightest idea that the man sitting beside them was a writer, a poet. He knew how to share their feelings and interests and how to efface himself.

"Dear comrade," we read in Whitman's letter to Lewis Brown, a soldier who had returned to his farm, "I was highly pleased at your telling me in your letter about your folks' place, the house & land & all the items — you say I must excuse you for writing so much foolishness — nothing of the kind — My darling boy, when you write to me, you must write without ceremony, I like to hear every little thing about yourself & your affairs...." [1]

Whitman's own letters were also written "without ceremony", simply and straightforwardly. There are few admonitions in them, but they contain a sea of tenderness and an amazing feeling of "adhesiveness" with other people.

The poet's love for his "sons" in the hospitals (like the love expressed in his poetry for "you", "whoever you are") was devoid of the slightest tinge of the jealousy which is so often an integral part of love, not only between man and woman, but also between close relatives, comrades and friends.

Tom Sawyer and Lewis (Lew) Brown, with whom Whitman kept up a fairly long correspondence, were bosom friends. But this did not prevent the poet from being very friendly with each of them. In a letter to Tom, who had returned to the front, Whitman spoke of Brown, who had remained in the hospital (they finally amputated his leg): "Lew is so good, so affectionate — when I came away, he reached up his face, I put my arm around him, and we gave each other a long kiss...." [2]

In another letter the poet said of Lew, "He is the same good young man as ever, & always will be." [3] Sawyer, for his part, asked his friend Brown to give his love to Walter Whitman.

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[1] Ibid., p. 134.
[2] Ibid., p. 91.
[3] Ibid., p. 139.

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A letter to Brown from Brooklyn, where Whitman spent several days at the end of 1863, is filled with thoughtful questions about dozens of other soldiers in the hospital and with expressions of love for them: "Lew, I wish you to go in Ward B and tell a young cavalry man, his first name is Edwin, he is wounded in the right arm, that I sent him my love, & on the opposite side a young man named Charley wounded in left hand, & Jennings, & also a young man I love that lays now up by the door just above Jennings, that I sent them all my love."[1]

Of course, a hundred years ago American workingmen were far more free and open than they are now in speaking of their comradely love for each other, and did not fear, as people often do nowadays, that they might seem laughable, sentimental. Nonetheless the tenderness expressed in the poet's letters is truly astonishing. Walt Whitman had enough love for everybody.

Sometimes the poet gave kind advice to his young comrades, like a considerate father, asking them to avoid friendships with dubious characters or recommending that they eat sparingly, and so on. At Brown's request Whitman remained in attendance during a serious operation performed on the soldier, and then for several days stayed at his side, watching against the danger of fatal bleeding.

Tens and hundreds of wounded men responded with love and respect to the old man who sat for long hours beside their cots. Once, when he found out that Walt Whitman was ill, a former soldier named Fox wrote him from his home: "Oh! I should like to have been with you so I could have nursed you back to health & strength.... I shall never be able to recompense you for your kind care.... I am sure no Father could have cared for their own child, better than you did me."[2]

Words to the same effect expressing filial love can be found in many other letters written to the poet. In one letter a former soldier says that Whitman was like a father to him from the very first meeting and that thousands of other soldiers no doubt shared the feeling.

Whitman's experiences in the hospitals and his correspondence with the soldiers give us a better understanding of his verses about "manly love".

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[1] W. Whitman, *The Correspondence*, Vol. I, p. 177.

[2] Ibid.; p. 188.

Whitman was aware of the vital connection between his poetic work and the feelings which he experienced in the hospitals. When in his old age he read through his old letter to Fox, a genuine hymn of comradely love, he mentioned that what it said was for him "the most important something in the world". It was exactly this something that he had tried to "make clear in another way"[1] in his poetry.

During the war Whitman wrote a short poem which tells of the arrival in camp of a "tan-faced prairie-boy". These lines are directly related to the poet's pre-war poems about the bonds of comradeship and manly love.

Before you came to camp came many a welcome gift,
Praises and presents came and nourishing food,
till at last among the recruits,
You came, taciturn, with nothing to give—
we but look'd on each other,
When lo! more than all the gifts of the world
you gave me.

During the Civil War, in which the farmers and workers "in blue" defended their worthy cause, Whitman saw how the lofty feelings of friendship, mutual sympathy and solidarity with one's comrades, feelings which he was convinced had always found a place in the hearts of the working people, began to reveal themselves in more and more obvious fashion.

The Soviet critic Lunacharsky most likely did not know Whitman's definition of what he considered "the most important something in the world". But he felt intuitively how great a role the collectivist tendency played in the poet's work.

Meanwhile life dealt Walt Whitman further heavy blows. The poet felt the first signs of the serious illness which was later to make him an invalid.

During the Civil War misfortunes began to rain down on Whitman's head.

Whitman's eldest brother gave up working, and was finally recognized to be mentally ill. From month to month the health of another of his brothers, Andrew, an alcoholic, grew worse and worse. Andrew's wife Nancy also drank a great deal and became a prostitute.

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[1] Ibid., p. 188.

Andrew died in late 1863. Some time later his mother wrote to Walt that Nancy was continuing to walk the streets and sent her children out begging. The poet also had a sister called Hannah, who caused him no little anguish. In her letters to her family Hannah constantly complained about her unhappy marriage. Walt Whitman tried to influence her husband, but nothing came of it.

Relations between the mother and the families of her other children in Brooklyn were not very smooth either. This had to do with the behavior of her weak-minded son, the mischievousness of her grandchildren, caprices of her daughters-in-law, and possibly the eccentricities of the old woman herself. Walt Whitman continuously played the role of peacemaker, sending money to Brooklyn and remonstrating with his many relatives.

Even George Whitman, the one who had turned out so well, and was now treading the paths of the war as though charmed against bullets, demanded the expenditure of great moral and physical strength on the part of the poet. About six months before the end of the war the Whitmans found out that George had been taken prisoner. For a long time they feared he was dead. The poet did everything he could to arrange an exchange of Whitman the officer for some prisoner of war held by the Northerners. As a result of the intervention of friends he managed to obtain permission for the exchange from General Grant himself.

The kind, gentle and apparently well-balanced Walt Whitman remained a militant supporter of the North. He pitied the sick soldiers, even if they were Southerners, for he knew very well the sort of power those who stood at the apex of slave society exercised over the culturally retarded farmers of the South. But the poet passionately hated the "Copperheads", the secret northern supporters of the Confederacy.

When he found out in April 1864 that the "Copperheads" in the United States Congress were "getting furious" and wanted "to recognize the Southern Confederacy",[1] Whitman spoke out decisively against making peace with the slave owners.

In a letter to a certain James Kirkwood, who sometimes sent him money to help the wounded, the poet's hatred toward the southerners' secret supporters is expressed in extremely sharp terms. "The north has been & is yet honeycombed with

[1] W. Whitman, *The Correspondence*, Vol. I, p. 209.

semi-secesh sympathisers ever ready to undermine—& I am half disposed to predict that after the war closes, we shall see bevies of star-straps, two or three of our own Major Generals, shot for treachery, & fully deserve their fate."[1]

"The Good Gray Poet"

The cares of the war years, and, perhaps more than anything else, his work in the hospitals caused the poet's health to deteriorate and he began to have more and more frequent fainting spells.

In all probability Whitman was suffering from an illness which could not be diagnosed in those days—high blood pressure. This would explain the fainting spells and his high color. Doctors warned Whitman that it was dangerous for him to spend so much time in the hospitals among men suffering from typhus, dysentery and other infectious diseases. But Whitman had no intention of changing his way of life.

One of the few joyful occurrences in the poet's life during the war was receiving a letter from a high Washington official, stating that if Mr. Walter Whitman satisfactorily passed an examination, he would be given the post of a civil servant, although admittedly of the very lowest rank.

In "An Indian Bureau Reminiscence" the poet wrote: "After the close of the Secession War in 1865, I work'd several months ... in the Interior Department at Washington, in the Indian Bureau." In actual fact he began to work for the Indian Bureau somewhat earlier, while the war was still going on. Whitman took up his modest position in the government apparatus at the end of January. Now he was more often able to slip banknotes into the envelopes he addressed to his mother.

In the Indian Bureau Whitman was only a copyist, but he took joy in his contacts with the Indians. Soon, however, the poet had to leave this job.

The episode of Whitman's expulsion from this governmental institution, one of the best known in his biography, may not seem very important. But the unexpected conflict between Whitman and the United States Secretary of the Interior James

[1] Ibid., p. 215.

Harlan reflected certain important features of American political life.

A petty, vain, self-satisfied hypocrite, Harlan had been appointed Secretary of the Interior because the government needed the support of an influential religious organization. A zealous supporter of respectability, Harlan entered the building of the department entrusted to him as though it were the devil's den which had to be cleansed of filth. Those who did not possess the necessary "moral character", or were insufficiently devoted to their "duty" found themselves under fire.

Among those who were discharged soon after Harlan assumed his duties was Walt Whitman.

How Harlan became aware that the author of an "amoral" book was working in the Indian Bureau cannot be ascertained. It is possible that some sort of gossip about *Leaves of Grass* reached his ears even before he took up his Washington office. Jeff, like O'Connor, immediately sensed hypocrisy in Harlan. "His conduct was to be expected," he wrote to his brother. "From that class you can never get anything but lying and meanness.... The poor mean-minded man — If Christ come to earth again ... he would have a mighty poor show with Harlan...."[1] It is of some interest that Harlan served as the prototype for one of the most repulsive characters in the satirical novel *The Gilded Age* by Mark Twain and Charles Dudley Warner.

Walt Whitman was dismissed on the 30th of June, 1865, and already on the lst of July he was given a job in the office of the Attorney General. But the news of his dismissal found its way into the newspapers. Whitman, his friends in Washington, and his family in Brooklyn were literally stunned by what had happened.

Van Anden, the owner of the Brooklyn *Eagle*, did not pass up the chance to settle accounts with the obstinate editor who almost twenty years earlier had dared to campaign against slavery on the pages of his paper.

The Brooklyn *Eagle* for the 12th of July, 1865, carried the statement that Walt Whitman had lost his position in the Interior Department under a general order discharging immoral persons, with his *Leaves of Grass* produced as evidence of his immorality. This was followed by a bit of "informing":

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[1] G. W. Allen, *The Solitary Singer*, pp. 346-47.

Whitman now worked in the Attorney General's office, where they were evidently not so particular about morals.

In the Attorney General's office they were not frightened by Van Anden. A friend of O'Connor's held a high post in that office and we owe to this very man an account of a conversation with O'Connor concerning Harlan's action. O'Connor called Whitman the greatest poet America ever produced. He saw in his dismissal an insult to American literature.

O'Connor was bold enough to repeat Emerson's judgement of the poet in the years when the philosopher himself was probably beginning to doubt the correctness of his exuberant words. The incident with Harlan prompted the appearance of the first, and most famous, critical work on the author of *Leaves of Grass.* O'Connor decided to write a book which would counter the slanderous judgements on Whitman by unfolding the genuine character of this great poet and worthy man. The work was entitled *The Good Gray Poet.*

In refuting all accusations of "immorality" and exposing the falseness of the notion that Whitman was some sort of a bum, the author gives a detailed portrayal of the "good gray poet" as a man of rare spiritual purity. It is no secret, he says, what kind of man Whitman is; he is known to thousands of people in New York, Brooklyn, Boston and other American cities. The author describes with lively sympathy the calm, proud and amiable face of the poet, mentioning his blue eyes and graying hair. Whitman wears the rough clothing of simple people. The author of *The Good Gray Poet* feels obliged to add that his clothing is always irreproachably clean.

In the book there emerges the image of a man who has helped fugitive slaves and worked throughout the war as a voluntary male nurse. Day and night Whitman went from bed to bed in the hospitals, calming and comforting the sick, helping them to regain their strength. All his life he was a brother and friend to the poor and the despised. Nobody whom O'Connor knew could love with such sincerity.

O'Connor fully realized that his battle was not only with the Secretary of the Interior. Harlan's views represented those of many other "respectable" Americans. *The Good Gray Poet* is basically a polemic with certain important writers in the United States as well.

When, on the eve of the war, Emerson wanted to bring Whitman as his guest to an exclusive club, the philosopher's

Boston friends opposed the idea so strongly that the visit had to be cancelled. When he found out in conversation that someone had a letter of introduction to Walt Whitman, Lowell exclaimed in horror: "Do you know who Walt Whitman is? Why — Walt Whitman is a rowdy, a New York tough, a loafer, a frequenter of low places — friend of cab drivers." [1]

When Trowbridge first saw the poet he was amazed, and perhaps even somewhat disappointed. The person he saw was the quietest man imaginable.

O'Connor's work was issued only after the appearance of *Drum-Taps.* Whitman's poem dedicated to the memory of Lincoln had also been printed. Probably no other poem by the "good gray poet" expresses his love of humanity as forcefully as this one.

Nonetheless, Whitman needed to be defended. And O'Connor was not the only one to realize this. Burroughs also wrote articles defending Whitman as a man who possessed a great and luminous spirit.

Nobody's efforts, however, could protect the "good gray poet" from new attacks and further painful blows.

The fact that Harlan's hostility to Whitman was in no way exceptional is witnessed by the fate of the poet's work in the sixties. During this period the poet hardly touched on any of the subjects which had aroused the indignation of prudish critics. He wrote about the heroism of the soldiers in blue, about their brave deeds and their sufferings. He sang the praises of Lincoln. He speculated on what the life of the country would be like after the war. And yet in the editorial offices of American newspapers and magazines Whitman's poetry aroused even more irritation than before. Not one publisher wanted to print his book *Drum-Taps.*

The story of what happened at the time to "Eighteen Sixty-One", one of Whitman's most beautiful poetic works on the Civil War, is highly characteristic. In October 1861 Whitman sent the poem to Lowell, the editor of the *Atlantic,* together with two other poems which also apparently dealt with the war. The gray-haired author of several books of poetry was as shy as a novice in literature and in his letter to the editor Whitman agreed beforehand to any changes which Lowell might want to make. He also included a self-addressed

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[1] H. S. Canby, *Walt Whitman,* p. 277.

envelope for the return of his manuscripts if the editor could not use them.

The envelope came in handy; the *Atlantic* refused all three works. Before they could use these poems, explained the editors, interest in them, which was directly linked to the events of the day, would have disappeared. Recalling all this in his old age, Whitman said sadly that he had always written with something more in mind than the issues of the day. Of course, poems by other authors which were dedicated to contemporary events, that is, to the war between North and South, were printed in large numbers in the American periodical press.

The desire to publish a collection of new poems arose in the poet when the war was at its height. The title of the book came to him immediately — *Drum-Taps*. In November, 1863, Whitman wrote from Brooklyn to his former publisher Eldridge, "I must bring out Drum Taps. I *must* be continually bringing out poems...."[1] The poet had much to say to his fellow-countrymen.

Yet nobody wished to publish *Drum-Taps*. So Whitman decided to print the book at his own expense. In a letter written from Brooklyn to his faithful friend O'Connor on the 6th of January, 1865, the poet says: "It may be Drum-Taps may come out this winter.... It is in a state to put right through, a perfect copy being ready for the printers — I feel at last, & for the first time without any demur, that I am satisfied with it.... It is in my opinion superior to Leaves of Grass — certainly more perfect as a work of art, being adjusted in all its proportions, & its passion having the indispensable merit that though to the ordinary reader let loose with wildest abandon, the true artist can see it is yet under control."[2]

What gave Whitman the most satisfaction was that in the *Drum-Taps* he had managed "to express ... (& in the way I like, which is not at all by directly stating it) the pending action of this *Time & Land we swim in...*".[3]

The poet had striven to convey in his book "the unprecedented anguish of wounded & suffering, the beautiful young men, in wholesale death & agony". Everything was painted "in blood color". His collection was "unprecedently sad", but it

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[1] W. Whitman, *The Correspondence*, Vol. I, p. 185.

[2] Ibid., p. 246.

[3] Ibid.

also had "the blast of the trumpet" and "the drum pounds & whirrs in it". There is also "an undertone of sweetest comradeship & human love, threading its steady thread inside the chaos, & heard at every lull & interstice thereof — truly also it has clear notes of faith & triumph".[1]

"The Sweetest, Wisest Soul"

Drum-Taps had not yet been brought out when Richmond, the Confederacy's stronghold, fell to the northern troops. This occurred on April 3, 1865. Soon thereafter the commander of the southern armies, General Lee, surrendered. The war ended in triumph; the planters were crushingly defeated. But in mid-April President Lincoln was treacherously assassinated by an agent of the slave owners.

Although on the eve of the war and during its early stages the poet regarded Lincoln with reserve, he later came to love him. Jeff Whitman could not forgive the president for hesitating to deploy forces against the South; but his elder brother saw in Lincoln a worthy leader of the American people in one of the most difficult and glorious moments of its history.

In late 1863 Whitman made an entry in his diary describing how he happened to be in the White House and caught a glimpse of the president in the distance. Lincoln was apparently talking with a close friend. The poet was overjoyed to notice that Lincoln held his friend by the hand and put his other hand on his shoulder.

Some time later Whitman wrote to one of his correspondents about Lincoln: "I see the President often. I think better of him than many do. He has conscience & homely shrewdness — conceals an enormous tenacity under his mild, gawky western manner."[2]

In his letters Whitman observed that the president was altogether different from the politicians who surrounded him in Washington. He said that there was something fine about the president's face. On the other hand, Whitman describes the members of Congress as men of rather low capabilities. No wonder these politicians were afraid of public opinion. The

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[1] W. Whitman, *The Correspondence*, Vol. I, p. 247.
[2] Ibid., p. 215.

poet related with alarm that Lincoln's face revealed signs of ever increasing weariness. "... I had a good view of the President last evening—he looks more careworn even than usual—his face with deep cut lines, seams, & his *complexion gray*, through very dark skin, a curious looking man, very sad...,"[1] he wrote to his mother in the summer of 1863.

It is difficult to say with any certainty whether the president responded with warmth to the great American poet's love for him. I have already noted that Lincoln probably acquainted himself with *Leaves of Grass* soon after its publication. There is testimony (the reliability of which, however, is subject to doubt) that Lincoln took notice of Whitman when he was in the White House.

Lincoln was killed in spring, when the lilacs were in bloom. Not long before the president's death Whitman had noted in his diary that the last few nights had been particularly fine. Venus had never looked so big and bright. The appearance of the beautiful star immediately became a symbol in the poet's mind for the marvellous man who had perished for his country and freedom. Burroughs provided Whitman with another image which moved him, the image of a solitary thrush singing a lonely song of mourning. These images of the star, the bird and the lilac all went into Whitman's great poem "When Lilacs Last in the Dooryard Bloom'd", written in memory of Lincoln.

On the day of the assassination the poet was not in Washington, but in Brooklyn, with his family. On Saturday morning they heard of the evil deed which had been perpetrated. His mother prepared breakfast, then dinner and supper as usual, recalled Whitman, but neither she nor he ate anything that day. The shops were shut and the traffic in the city had almost completely ceased; flags of mourning hung everywhere.

It was decided that the president should be buried in his home town of Springfield; the funeral train was to pass through many big towns on the way. The coffin was covered with huge lilac branches.

The poem "When Lilacs Last in the Dooryard Bloom'd" is a song of mourning in memory of the dead president. Whitman does not set himself the aim of recreating Lincoln's appear-

[1] Ibid., p. 113.

ance, relating his achievements as a historical figure or describing the circumstances of his death.

Whitman's poem consists of several parts which develop various themes. One could describe "When Lilacs Last in the Dooryard Bloom'd" as a symphony whose elements, when taken together, form a unity. The motifs of the work often clash, but it is precisely the contrast, and struggle of motifs, followed by interweaving and fusion of disparate elements which bring out the full meaning of the poem.

The motifs used in "When Lilacs Last in the Dooryard Bloom'd" are to a certain extent anticipated in "Out of the Cradle Endlessly Rocking". This is also a poem about a bitter loss and death.

A "curious boy", the future poet, joyfully watches "two feather'd guests from Alabama".

And every day the he-bird to and fro near at hand,
And every day the she-bird crouch'd on her nest,
silent, with bright eyes....

Suddenly the she-bird disappeared, "nor ever appear'd again". The poet goes on to depict the tragedy of this loss. Endless grief, misery and torment sound in the inconsolable song of the "lone-singer". The loved one will not return. And grief grows.

Hither my love!
Here I am! here!
With this just-sustain'd note I announce myself to you,
This gentle call is for you my love, for you....

Loved! loved! loved! loved! loved!
But my mate no more, no more with me!
We two together no more.

The future poet becomes aware of the meaning of death. The sea, "delaying not, hurrying not" lisps to him "the low and delicious word death".

The monumental theme of life and death is treated in "When Lilacs Last in the Dooryard Bloom'd" far more concretely, profoundly and with even greater poetic power.

One of the most important motifs in the poem is the "powerful western fallen star", a "moody, tearful night" bear-

ing the news of tragedy, of the death of a great and well-loved man. Lincoln is not named in the poem itself. But of course the reader knows for whom Whitman is mourning, and the historical tragedy unfolds before him.

O great star disappear'd — O the black murk that hides the star!
O cruel hands that hold me powerless — O helpless soul of me!
O harsh surrounding cloud that will not free my soul.

In order to express his grief and the grief of millions of his fellow-countrymen, the lyric poet creates a wealth of other images which deepen the sense of irredeemable loss (his soul "in its trouble dissatisfied sank", church organs "shudder", "the great cloud darkening the land", the cities are draped in black, the song of "the bleeding throat" is heard, "the mournful voices of the dirges pour'd around the coffin").

Now, with the president slain by the enemy, Whitman thinks in love and sadness not only of the remarkable man who headed the northern camp and led it to victory, but also of Lincoln's companions in arms, the multitude of men who did not live to see the day of victory. The poet says:

Nor for you, for one alone,
Blossoms and branches green to coffins all I bring....

During the Civil War Whitman had "known" death in all its terrifying majesty. And "the sacred knowledge of death" is walking now beside him, says the lyric poet in anguish. The poem "When Lilacs Last in the Dooryard Bloom'd" is an immensely expressive requiem for Abraham Lincoln.

José Marti expressed the following opinion regarding Whitman's poem: "Perhaps the most beautiful in modern poetry is the song of mourning composed by Whitman for Lincoln. Nature itself follows the hearse in tears. Stars foretold this death. A black cloud appeared a month before the murder. A gray bird sang a song of desolation in the marsh. The poet walks across the shocked earth and the knowledge of death walks on one side of him and the thought of death on the other, and he is between them as though out for a walk with

friends. Like a master musician Whitman collects, cherishes and reproduces the sad notes of twilight. By the end of the song one feels that the whole Earth is in mourning, from sea to sea." [1]

Here the Cuban writer has faithfully conveyed the mood of the work. But the poem contains more than just funeral tones. It does not make one think of death alone. Even on this occasion the poet remains faithful to his life-affirming view of the world, to his love for people and his awareness that the people will live for ever.

In the very title of the poem a contrast arises before us. In the first lines the motif of the lilacs, of the joy of spring, the motif of life is merged with the theme of mourning. Whitman begins the poem with the following words:

When lilacs last in the dooryard bloom'd,
And the great star early droop'd in the western sky in the night,
I mourn'd, and yet shall mourn with ever-returning spring.

The time when lilacs bloom cannot bring only tears. In Whitman's poem the theme of death is gradually transformed, taking on other, lighter hues. Death must not get the upper hand over life. The bird, whose image embodies the deepest feelings of the poet, sings a song, and in this song there are the following words:

Prais'd be the fathomless universe,
For life and joy, and for objects and knowledge curious,
And for love, sweet love — but praise! praise! praise!
For the sure-enwinding arms of cool-enfolding death.

What is the truth behind these apparently contradictory lines? Praise for "sweet love" and praise for the "cool-enfolding death"? The poet's voice continues to praise death as the voice of his spirit "tallied the song of the bird":

Dark mother always gliding near with soft feet,
Have none chanted for thee a chant of fullest welcome?
Then I chant it for thee, I glorify thee above all,

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[1] José Marti, *Obras completas*, t. XIII, Habana, 1961, p. 174.

I bring thee a song that when thou must indeed come,
come unfalteringly.

The solution to this contradiction is to be found, of course, in life itself. Whitman, who had often expressed in his poetry the lofty idea of the endless advance of mankind and the ability of people "en-masse" to overcome all obstacles, did not see death as a tragic absurdity, as something meaningless, but as proof of the grandeur of the laws of nature, as a fact of real life — perfectly natural, inevitable and necessary. Yes, people die; but the human race will live for ever. That is why death is "lovely", "soothing". That is why the motif of the lilacs arises in the poem not as a comforting deception, but as a truly inevitable aspect of an immense truth, an indispensable part of a complex whole.

While declaring death to be an inescapable part of existence, the poet rejects it emotionally, and celebrates his victory over it. The motif of the lilacs runs through the entire poem from beginning to end. Whitman says:

In the dooryard fronting an old farm-house
near the white-wash'd palings,
Stands the lilac-bush tall-growing with heart-shaped
leaves of rich green,
With many a pointed blossom rising delicate,
with the perfume strong I love,
With every leaf a miracle — and from this bush
in the dooryard,
With delicate-color'd blossoms and heart-shaped
leaves of rich green,
A sprig with its flower I break.

And further on:

... mostly and now the lilac that blooms the first,
Copious I break, I break the sprigs from the bushes,
With loaded arms I come....

And still further on:

Passing, I leave thee lilac with heart-shaped
leaves,

I leave thee there in the door-yard, blooming,
returning with spring.

The image of the lilac is the image of eternal beauty, continually reborn and never disappearing. The poet's assertion that life is good whatever happens is not only conveyed in symbolic images. The poem contains concrete poetic images of the life for which the soldiers in blue fought.

Lo, body and soul—this land,
My own Manhattan with spires, and the sparkling
and hurrying tides, and the ships,
The varied and ample land, the South and the North
in the light, Ohio's shores
and flashing Missouri,
And ever the far-spreading prairies cover'd
with grass and corn....
The violet and purple morn with just-felt breezes...
The coming eve delicious, the welcome night and
the stars,
Over my cities shining all, enveloping man and land.

Whitman deliberately counterposes a hymn glorifying nature and man to the theme of death. He even wishes to adorn the mausoleum in which Lincoln is buried so as not to arouse anguish and sadness. The poet wants to adorn it with "pictures of growing spring and farms and homes ... with the fresh sweet herbage under foot", with "the breast of the river" in the distance. He kneels before the magnificence of labor, the beauty of the city and men's lives. The poet wants "the city at hand with dwellings so dense, and stacks of chimneys". There are workshops there, "and the workmen homeward returning". All this for "the sweetest, wisest soul".

The denial of death in the name of life is a vital and a marvelous feature of Whitman's poetry.

The small volume entitled *Drum-Taps*, printed in the spring of 1865, did not include "When Lilacs Last in the Dooryard Bloom'd". This poem appeared in *Sequel to Drum-Taps*, a thin book only twenty-four pages long. It also contained another work in memory of Lincoln, "O Captain! My Captain!", a poem which is fairly traditional in form.

At first "O Captain! My Captain!" attracted more attention than the first great poem of mourning for Lincoln, with its

complex interweaving of ideas, images, pictures and musical themes. Whitman was grieved and sometimes resentful about this.

Both *Drum-Taps* and *Sequel* abounded in poetic masterpieces. In the fire of grave historical events Whitman's creative gift had been further tempered. The wartime poems do not betray so strong a desire to make "Walt Whitman" stand as an expression of man's essence. Here one finds more that is individual and concrete. At the same time the beating of a kind heart is clearly audible, and the warmth of a comradely and fatherly hand is quite tangible.

Nonetheless, the new poems, while expressing everything the poet had felt during his long sleepless nights in the hospitals, caused him a great deal of distress. Whitman was not so young as he had been when the first edition of *Leaves of Grass* appeared, and the blows dealt him by the critics who got hold of *Drum-Taps* (with the *Sequel* of poems on Lincoln) proved to be particularly painful.

It happened that this collection was reviewed by two writers who, together with Mark Twain, were destined to emerge at the turn of the century as masters of the first rank. They were William Dean Howells, a prolific novelist and critic (a close friend of Twain, he played an outstanding role in the development of critical realism in the United States) and Henry James, one of the greatest American prose writers. Both were very young at the time and later they were better able to comprehend the worth of the poet's work; but with their articles, written soon after the Civil War, they inflicted much pain both on the poet and on the members of his family.

True, Howells did make a few favorable comments about Whitman's verse, but basically he had a negative view. James was even more openly antagonistic. Walt Whitman was for him a man lacking all that a real poet should possess — beginning with taste.

We would not have recalled these articles if they were the exception to the rule. The abolitionist Frank Sanborn, in his kindly remarks about *Drum-Taps*, spoke bitterly about the way the poet's work was received in his homeland. Whitman's attempts to find a publisher came to nothing, Sanborn pointed out, and his works could not be obtained at a bookstore. Several years ago F. De Wolfe Miller made the following

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observation in his preface to a facsimile edition of *Drum-Taps*: "Even insignificant poets could obtain a good imprint on their title pages, while Whitman's book went begging." [1]

The wartime poems form a precious part of the poet's heritage. In a letter to his mother he describes a parade of troops setting out for the front, adding gloomily that many of these handsome young men would be corpses before the apples could ripen in the orchards. Reading through some of his wartime correspondence in his old age, the author of *Drum-Taps* cursed bloodshed. But he defended tirelessly and unfailingly the cause of the North in the Civil War.

In his lectures in honor of Lincoln, given in the late seventies and early eighties, Whitman said that the Civil War years would yet give birth to a great literature; and some remarkable works of prose and poetry about the Civil War really have been produced in the United States. But the most remarkable poet of those four years was Whitman himself.

F. DeWolfe Miller quotes the following "notes in Whitman's hand" containing the poet's own estimate of *Drum-Taps*: "His late production 'Drum Taps' is the expression of the war, the rousing of the North at the commencement, the first losses and defeats, the doubt & terrible uncertainty, the perseverance, of scenes among the wounded & dying, the smoke & thunder & fierceness of battle — & yet more, all the human interests and sympathies of the struggle. War itself he does not celebrate." [2]

The author of *Drum-Taps* said more than once that only with the beginning of that war did he mature as a poet. In the preface to the 1876 edition of *Leaves of Grass* we find the remark that "the whole Book, indeed, revolves around that Four-Years' War"... [3]

To be sure, most of the poems included in *Leaves of Grass* were written before the Civil War. But even so Whitman was essentially right.

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[1] *W. Whitman's* **Drum-Taps**, Ed. by F. DeWolfe Miller, Gainesville, Florida, Scholars' Facsimiles & Reprints, 1959, p. XXV.

[2] Ibid., p. IX.

[3] W. Whitman, *Leaves of Grass*, 1928, p. 517.

PART FOUR

FIRM AS EVER

* * *

The War Is Over

The United States soon returned to a life of peace. Even at the height of the war Whitman had noticed on his way from Washington to Brooklyn that the towns and villages through which he passed looked very prosperous. The poet said that everyone was well dressed, the markets were full of foodstuffs, and the factories were working at full steam. Even during the years of the greatest bloodshed many new enterprises were built in the country.

Now that the power of the South had been shattered and there was no longer anything to prevent the rapid expansion of capitalist production, a positive bacchanalia of business activity broke out in the country.

For the Whitman family, however, the first months after the war were not joyful ones. Even George, who had just returned from the war a hero, could not fit into peaceful life.

Now he thought of going into business, now decided to go back to the army. In the end, he returned to the building trade, his occupation during his father's lifetime. Walt Whitman wrote once that George was back at his carpentry.

For the time being George's affairs ceased to worry the poet's mother. But the condition of her two mentally disturbed sons gave her no peace, especially that of the one, who had long been in an insane asylum. The old woman was also worried about her daughter, the unfortunate children of her dead son Andrew, and finally her favorite, Walt. The mother was dreaming that he would build a house and live with her. Meanwhile she had to ask him to give her a little more money—George had become rather miserly.

Walt continued to work in the Attorney General's office and, as before, spent many hours in the hospitals. Here the number of wounded gradually diminished, but those who remained roused the deepest pity; for the most part they were completely shattered wrecks, hopelessly ill people. As he had during the war, Whitman described in his letters to relatives and friends the nights he spent at the bedside of dying soldiers. Most often they perished of neglected wounds or of consumption. These letters reveal still more pictures of quiet human heroism. A dying soldier asks Whitman not to write to his family (and he himself does not write) because, as we learn from the poet's letters, the soldier's mother is very weak and a letter would cause her pain, for he is her only son. Although a Southerner, he had fought in the ranks of the northern army.

At times the poet arranged small parties to cheer up the sick men who were losing hope of ever leaving the hospital. He amused them as well as he could — reading comical stories, for example. Whitman was still indispensable to these unfortunate people. His correspondence with the wounded men who had gone home also shrank, but did not cease altogether. The poet joyfully informed his mother of invitations to visit recuperated soldiers he had once cared for in the hospitals.

As before, the poet was cheered up by the O'Connors, the Burroughs and some other Washington friends. Whitman had become the O'Connors' closest friend. Burroughs' wife was by nature a puritan who could not grow completely accustomed to the poet, but the naturalist himself was attracted by Whitman's broad, motherly spirit. Burroughs recalled that he loved him as he had never loved any other man.

These comradely ties were very satisfying for the poet, but with the passage of time he began to miss that especially tender, almost filial relationship, that of a father to his sons, which had developed between himself and some young soldiers in the hospitals. These soldiers, alone and scared, had been in such great need of fatherly comfort. Whitman was almost fifty years old, and he began to feel the need of filial love more and more strongly.

For a number of years his adopted son was Peter Doyle, a street-car conductor and later a railroad worker.

Whitman first met Doyle in Washington a few months after the war. Doyle related how one cold night, during a storm, Whitman was the only passenger in his street-car and

he decided to talk with the man. They became friendly at once.

An extensive correspondence between Whitman and Doyle has been preserved. The American critic James Miller, Jr. says in his book about Whitman that these letters are a convincing proof of the purity and lofty nature of the feelings which bound the poet and the youth.

Doyle was from Virginia, had served in the Confederate army and had been taken prisoner. Later he was freed. A quiet and modest youth less than twenty years old, he felt out of place in a strange city.

The first letter from Doyle to Whitman of which we are aware is polite and calm, written in the respectful tone of a son corresponding with his father. Doyle gave his opinion of a book he had read and sent regards from Dave and the other boys at the place where he worked. A week later Whitman answered Doyle. He described his impressions of New York and talked about his old friends, the ferry pilots, whom he had visited once again. He also inquired after Doyle's health and that of his mother.

Whitman gradually took Doyle into his circle of friends. In one letter to Doyle written in September, 1868, for instance, the poet speaks of him as a "loving friend" and a "dear comrade" and sends his love to the other street-car workers, certain Jim and Charley.

Whitman was fully aware that for all his kindness and devotion to him, Doyle could not share his interests. In his letters he very rarely touches on questions involving his poetic work, limiting himself to subjects directly relevant to Doyle, or to curious and amusing facts of life. In one letter the poet recalls with gentle humor how he had once tried to tell Pete something about heavenly affairs and suddenly discovered that his listener had fallen soundly asleep. Occasionally the poet made attempts to improve Doyle's mind. He would give him a dictionary or recommend that he start to study. Whitman also sent Pete novels to read.

When Doyle was in difficult straits, the poet gave him support. Pete was weak in character and fell to despairing for insignificant reasons. When in the late sixties he contracted some minor ailment, he contemplated suicide. Whitman even tried to appeal to Doyle's religious views as a Roman Catholic, scaring him with the tortures of hell which await suicides.

When Pete was once again hit by bad luck — he was expecting to be dismissed from work — Whitman once more came to his help. He cheered up the youth, promising to send him money every Saturday if he were to lose his job.

Walt Whitman worked tirelessly to build up Pete's confidence in himself. After all, everybody has his share of misfortunes, disappointments and failures, especially proud-spirited young people who have to earn their own living....

When the critic John Addington Symonds suggested that the poet's verses about "manly love" indicated a pathological interest in his own sex, the poet was deeply offended. Such suggestions, wrote Whitman to Symonds, "dazed" him. Even the possibility of such an interpretation was terrible. The pages of *Leaves of Grass*, said Whitman, "are not to be even mentioned for such gratuitous and quite at the time undreamed and unwished possibility of morbid inference — which are disavowed by me and seem damnable".[1] Further on, either wishing to mock his correspondent, or attempting to help him get rid of sick thoughts, the poet assured Symonds that he had six children, and that one of his grandsons, a fine youth, sometimes wrote to him.

No researcher has been able to unearth any facts which would confirm that the poet had children and grandchildren.

While expressing without embarrassment his comradely and fatherly love for people who had become dear to him, Whitman had a distaste for the slightest signs of affectation, pretense and sentimentality.

Characteristic in this respect is his letter to the writer Charles Warren Stoddard, written in April 1870. Stoddard, a somewhat unbalanced man, had decided to look for an idyllic life among the natives of the Pacific Islands, since the people there "are not afraid of instincts and ... scorn hypocrisy". In answer to Stoddard's enthusiastic letter the poet wrote: "As to you, I do not of course object to your emotional & adhesive nature ... but do you know (perhaps you do,) how the hard, pungent, gritty, worldly experiences & qualities in American practical life, also serve? how they prevent extravagant sentimentalism?"[2]

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[1] *The Tenderest Lover*, Ed. by W. Lowenfels, N. Y., Delacorte Press, 1970, p. XXI.

[2] W. Whitman, *The Correspondence*, Vol. II, p. 97.

One of the most important features of Whitman's spiritual make-up, reflected in the best of his work, is precisely this harmonious combination of sober realism with love for people.

"We Have Met, We Have Look'd"

Walt Whitman was never married.

This sensitive man rarely complained. Obviously in conversations with people close to him the poet was just as reticent as in his letters; and in his letters, as a rule, he only mentioned himself briefly, touching on what he was doing and the state of his health, answering direct or implied questions, and then quickly proceeding to the affairs of his correspondents. His letters to his mother were full of concern for her well-being and questions about the life of his relatives, his brothers and sisters, sisters-in-law, nieces and nephews. His letters to his friends were like this, too, displaying a genuine interest in their needs and worries.

The poet whose work seemed to center entirely around the authorial "I", a point of view affirmed with unceremonious insistence, was in real life a quiet, timid and bashful man.

It is well known that Whitman never knew material comfort for any length of time. Before he entered government service he had not the slightest confidence that he could provide for a wife and children. In the prime of his life the poet lived for the most part on chance earnings. During this period he also had to care for his mother and the other members of his family.

The Civil War immediately occupied all the poet's thoughts and feelings. At the end of the war he was only forty-six, but his health had begun to fail and he looked like an old man.

The poet's attitude to marriage and family life was simple and sound. He was warm in his relations with his sisters-in-law and loved to sit round the family table with his married friends. Whitman insistently recommended his young soldier comrades to start families.

Leaves of Grass shows unambiguously, passionately and defiantly that Walt Whitman loved and was himself loved. No wonder puritans persecuted the author of this book all his life.

Walt Whitman had all the makings of a family man, as evidenced by his constant concern for the members of the wide-flung branches of the Whitman family, which was a permanent feature of his life and was reflected in his will.

The poet's letters to Peter Doyle and several other young Americans whom he watched over, cherished and taught to live nobly, are the letters of a father or an elder brother.

Lowell and several other American writers considered that there was no place for Whitman in respectable clubs and drawing-rooms. And yet his contemporaries could find nothing scandalous to say about the poet. In the twentieth century, however, many critics, arming themselves with the doubtful ammunition of psychopathologists, set about creating an atmosphere of wild conjecture around the name of Walt Whitman.

Whitman's biographers have offered us no real proof of the poet's homosexual inclinations. Even those American critics for whom Freudian analysis of sexual pathology is the most important instrument of literary criticism are forced to confess that, as far as Whitman is concerned, they can only work from "intuition", not from facts. Thus, James Miller, while in many ways misinterpreting Whitman's character and work in his books and articles, admits in the *Critical Guide to* **Leaves of Grass** (1957) that even in the special cycle of poems about "manly love" it is impossible not to recognize purity.

But who were the women loved by Whitman? Although Whitman's ascertainable biography is poor in information about his love life, we still do know something about it.

In the last years of his life Whitman often went through his manuscripts and letters. We know that he burned many of them. It may be supposed that his love letters were among those that were distroyed. It was probably by pure chance that a letter to him from a certain Ellen Eyre has been preserved. In this letter, written in early 1862, she speaks of her love for Whitman and of the happiness which he had given her. She expresses the hope that they will see each other again. It is interesting that the letter mentions the need for precaution and secrecy because of his correspondent's "social position".[1]

Whitman never wrote album poetry and very rarely dedicated verses to anyone. But among his works there are some which were undoubtedly evoked by very real emotions of the heart, including a short poem which begins like this:

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[1] *The Tenderest Lover*, p. XXIII.

I heard you solemn-sweet pipes of the organ as last
Sunday morn I pass'd the church,
Winds of autumn, as I walk'd the woods at dusk I heard
your long-stretch'd sighs up above so mournful,
I heard the perfect Italian tenor singing at the opera,
I heard the soprano in the midst of the quartet
singing....

Whitman goes on to express the most intimate feelings:

Heart of my love! you too I heard murmuring low through
one of the wrists around my head,
Heard the pulse of you when all was still ringing little
bells last night under my ear.

The poem "I Heard You Solemn-Sweet Pipes of the Organ" is one of the most enchanting and subtle of Whitman's love lyrics. This hymn of love for a woman could not be the product of pure imagination, something simply "thought up". The poem bears the unmistakable stamp of a personal experience, the experience of a great love. But we do not know about whom this poem was written. The poet kept the secrets of his heart behind seven locks.

There is one lyrical poem by Whitman, however, addressed to a beloved woman whose name has been established with some certainty. This poem, imbued with sweet sadness, begins as follows:

Out of the rolling ocean the crowd came a drop gently to me,
Whispering I love you, before long I die....

The lovers' meeting does not last for long:

Now we have met, we have look'd, we are safe,
Return in peace to the ocean, my love....
... the irresistible sea is to separate us....

So the lyrical hero of the poem acknowledges sadly that his loved one will not stay with him, that they have no future. The lovers are not fated to stay together. But "every day at sundown" the poet salutes "the air, the ocean and the land ... for your dear sake my love".

John Burroughs' biographer claims that the poem "Out of the Rolling Ocean the Crowd" was dedicated to Juliette Beach,

who had written Whitman many beautiful letters. Burroughs tried to obtain this woman's permission to publish her correspondence with the poet, but she refused point-blank.

The poem "Out of the Rolling Ocean the Crowd" first appeared in the collection *Drum-Taps*, but there is evidence that Juliette Beach entertained tender feelings for the poet even before the war.

Here are a few facts garnered from the American press of 1860.

When the third edition of *Leaves of Grass* appeared in the spring of that year, the editor of the journal *Saturday Press*, Henry Clapp, decided to give it a worthy reception. Clapp was one of the most interesting American literary men of his time, a man of bold judgements, and a stranger to prudishness (in conversation with his young friend and executor Horace Traubel, Whitman called Henry Clapp a friend). The *Saturday Press* published an editorial about *Leaves of Grass* greeting the appearance of a great philosopher, perhaps a great poet. Clapp promised that later he would print a detailed review of the book.

It was intended that the author of the review would be Juliette Beach. Sure enough, in the summer of 1860, the *Saturday Press* carried an article about the latest edition of *Leaves of Grass* over Juliette Beach's signature.

Strange as it may seem, however, the review was written in a completely different tone from the editorial. It was full of spleen and undisguised hatred for the author of *Leaves of Grass*, representing an attempt to wound and mock the poet.

Whitman's love poetry aroused particular fury in the reviewer. The poet, says the article, looks on women with the eyes of a very crude man seeking in love nothing more than the gratification of his animal instincts. For him all women are the same; he only gives preference to the more sensual sort.

It is fairly easy to imagine Walt Whitman's feelings on reading this malicious lampoon written by a woman who was apparently dear to him. Very soon, however, everything, or almost everything, was cleared up. A week later there appeared in the *Saturday Press* a correction of a rather unusual nature. The editors stated that according to a letter they had received from Mrs. Beach, the article in the last number

devoted to Walt Whitman's *Leaves of Grass* had been written not by her, but by Mr. Beach.

More than a hundred years have gone by, but no certain facts about what occurred between the Beaches in connection with the review published in the *Saturday Press* have come to light. Juliette Beach's letters, if they are still extant, have not yet been made public. Whitman, for his part, kept silent about their relationship until his death.

There is reason to believe, however, that Mrs. Beach decided to express in print her own opinion of *Leaves of Grass*. Two weeks later, in the same *Saturday Press*, over a signature "A Woman", there appeared a new review of Whitman's book. It's tone was quite different from that of Mr. Beach's article. After calling the poet a national genius and emphasizing the spiritual significance of his work, the author of the review prophesied general recognition for his bold and truthful book in the future.

Nothing more is known of the role that the heroine of "Out of the Rolling Ocean the Crowd" played in the life of the poet.

The most striking examples of Walt Whitman's love poems, in which he glorifies love and dreams of happiness with the woman he loves, were written in the fifties and early sixties.

In his introduction to a collection of Whitman's love poems W. Lowenfels states: "A letter only recently discovered shows that Nelly O'Connor ... was deeply in love with him, not only as a poet, but as a man".[1] In the letter quoted in the book *The Tenderest Lover* Nelly O'Connor says: "I always know that you know that I love you all the time...."[2]

We have much more information about the relationship between Whitman and an Englishwoman, Anne Gilchrist. She was the widow of the critic Alexander Gilchrist, the author of a famous biography of William Blake (she completed the book after the untimely death of her husband), and a friend of Tennyson, Carlyle and other well-known English writers.

This gifted woman assessed Whitman's poetry highly from the very start. In a letter to the critic William Rossetti, who was one of the first to acquaint the English public with *Leaves of Grass*, Anne Gilchrist said that she had been astounded by the

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[1] *The Tenderest Lover*, p. XXV.

[2] Ibid., pp. XXV-XXVI.

power of feeling in Whitman's poem "Tears", in his poems on the sea and in several others.

In 1870 Anne Gilchrist published her work on Walt Whitman. She gave his poetry an ecstatic evaluation (Rossetti had recommended that the authoress remain anonymous). In particular, Gilchrist spoke highly of the love poetry which made up the cycle "Children of Adam".

Anne Gilchrist's deep and subtle appreciation of Whitman's poetry grew into love for the poet himself. The following year this wonderful woman sent Whitman a letter in which she spoke openly of her feelings for him, a man whom she had never seen. Anne Gilchrist's first letter to the poet is a confession of love rare in its sincerity and boldness. But this love was fated to remain unrequited.

Whitman's correspondent told him of her marriage to a man who possessed "a deep beautiful true Poet's heart" [1], and was capable of a great love, but who did not arouse reciprocal feelings in her. Only many years after Gilchrist's death had she known real feeling, when she read Whitman's verses. "I never before dreamed what love meant: nor what life meant. Never was alive before. No words but those of 'new birth' can hint the meaning of what then happened to me." [2]

Expressing her hope that the poet will return her love, Anne Gilchrist exclaims: "I can wait—any time, a lifetime, many lifetimes—I can suffer, I can dare, I can learn, grow, toil...." [3]

These words were not the product of some exalted whim. Anne Gilchrist's love for Whitman filled the rest of her life; and she bore with genuine courage and restraint the burden of her disappointment. Anne Gilchrist's letter disturbed and embarrassed Whitman, for he could not respond to her love with an equal passion.

It is not difficult to imagine what tormenting effort his reply to her cost him. "Dear Friend," wrote Whitman, "I have been waiting quite a long while for time & the right mood to answer your letter in a spirit as serious as its own, & in the same unmitigated trust & affection.... But I must at least show, without further delay, that I am not insensible to your love. I too send you my love. And do you feel no disappointment be-

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[1] W. Whitman, *The Correspondence*, Vol. II, p. 134.
[2] Ibid., p. 135.
[3] Ibid., p. 136.

cause I now write but briefly. My book is my best letter, my response, my truest explanation of all. In it I have put my body & spirit.... Enough that there surely exists between us so beautiful & delicate a relation, accepted by both of us with joy." [1]

In this honest and extremely sensitive letter, which Whitman hoped would not cause his correspondent unnecessary suffering, he made it clear that they would remain friends, perhaps simply as poet and reader, one of those readers embraced in the love of his heart.

As Anne Gilchrist wrote in one of her letters, her further correspondence with Whitman brought her both joy and pain. It was impossible not to understand from the poet's friendly and tender, but brief letters that the hopes cherished by the woman who had fallen in love with him were mere illusions.

And yet she continued to dream of marrying him. In a postscript to a letter dated March 20, 1872, the poet tried to express even more clearly his attitude towards the declarations of love which came to him from across the ocean. He wrote: "Dear friend, let me warn you somewhat about myself — & yourself also. You must not construct such an unauthorized & imaginary ideal Figure, & call it W.W. and so devotedly invest your loving nature in it. The actual W.W. is a very plain personage, & entirely unworthy such devotion". [2]

Later, when Whitman was a semi-invalid and Anne Gilchrist's mother had died, she wanted to move (together with her three children) to the United States to be nearer to the poet. Whitman knew that in the depths of her heart she had still not abandoned the hopes she had nursed for many years. In her letters of early 1876 she speaks once more of her tender love for him and even stresses that she has means enough for them both to live a simple and unpretentious life.

But the poet, as previously, could not respond in kind to Anne Gilchrist's love and attempted to warn her against moving to his country. He wrote plainly that he did not approve of her plans. Hoping to prevent this woman from doing anything rash, Whitman even promised to visit London if his health would allow it.

Anne Gilchrist arrived in the United States at the end of

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[1] Ibid., p. 140.
[2] Ibid., p. 170.

summer, 1876. Obviously she realized there and then that they could be no more than friends.

According to Burroughs, who once visited the Gilchrists together with Whitman, the poet felt at home in this family. Anne Gilchrist settled with her children in Philadelphia (at that time the poet had also left Washington and was living in Camden, near Philadelphia). Whitman visited the Gilchrists quite often and even stayed with them for a few days at a time, in a room specially set aside for him. The reminiscences of Anne Gilchrist's daughter Grace make it clear that he was well liked by the whole family.

Eventually the Gilchrists moved from Philadelphia nearer to Boston, which was still a most important cultural center of the country. In mid-1879 Anne Gilchrist left the United States. Burroughs' biographer recounts the testimony of the man in whose house the poet had his last meeting with the woman who loved him so devotedly, saying that after a private conversation they came back to their hosts deeply disturbed. They had said goodbye forever.

Anne Gilchrist died before Whitman. In late 1885 her son Herbert informed the poet of his mother's death. The poet was extremely upset. "Dear Herbert," he wrote in reply, "I have rec'd your letter. Nothing now remains but a sweet & rich memory.... I cannot write any thing of a letter to-day. I must sit alone & think." [1]

It would be apt to say here that Whitman's love poetry, which roused such indignation in various critics, editors and censors, was accepted by many women during the poet's lifetime with respect and sympathy. They saw nothing wrong or abnormal in these verses.

The poet affirmed the blamelessness and beauty of healthy and natural expressions of human nature. He waged a bitter, losing battle against the prudery which dominated American art and life. Whitman exclaims:

> *If any thing is sacred the human body is sacred,*
> *And the glory and sweet of a man is the token*
> *of manhood untainted,*
> *And in man or woman a clean, strong, firm-fibred*
> *body, is more beautiful than the most*
> *beautiful face.*

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[1] W. Whitman, *The Correspondence*, Vol. III, p. 412-13.

The poet says that the man he likes "without shame ... avows the deliciousness of his sex" and the woman he likes "avows hers".

Such outpourings terrified Whitman's compatriots, yet Sarah Parton, who wrote under the pseudonym of Fanny Fern, was bold enough to speak out in defense of his "terrible" book. On the pages of the *New York Ledger*, she not only noted the courage of the author of *Leaves of Grass*, who was not afraid to "speak out his strong, honest thoughts in the face of pusillanimous, toadying, republican aristocracy",[1] but denied the accusation that he was crude and depraved. This woman derided those hypocrites who lived in terror of the "sinfulness" of the human body.

Not long before the Civil War an equally high opinion of Whitman's work was expressed by Adah Isaacs Menken. This talented poetess (her poetry shows Whitman's influence) and gifted actress, a brilliant woman who had nevertheless led a hard life, found in *Leaves of Grass* an expression of true morality. Whitman, she wrote in the *New York Sunday Mercury*, was a fighter for liberty and humanism. He was centuries ahead of his contemporaries.

Juliette Beach also saw in the poet's work the celebration not of "sin", but of the highest virtues.

Challenging the prejudices of society around them, other intelligent and honorable women spoke out against the hypocritical criticism of Whitman's poetry.

The same *Saturday Press* whose pages had been the stage for the tragicomic quarrel between the Beaches over Whitman's work, published in 1860 a letter by a certain Mary A. Chilton from Long Island, in which she spoke of the greatness of the poet's soul. "I see him now," says this woman, "as the apostle of purity who vindicates manhood and womanhood from the charges of infamy, degradation and vice."[2]

"Society ... Is Canker'd, Crude, Superstitious, and Rotten"

In the third letter which the First International addressed to the United States (the first letter was sent to Lincoln in late 1864, the second to Johnson shortly after the assassination of

[1] H. Canby, *Walt Whitman*, p. 122.
[2] *The Tenderest Lover*, pp. XXVII-XXVIII.

the president) there are important considerations relevant to the post-war perspectives of the republic. Unlike the first two letters, this one was written, not by Marx, but by the General Secretary of the International, William R. Cremer. Still Marx was present at the meeting which adopted the letter in September, 1865, and we may assume that it expressed his position as well.

The letter contains the prophetic warning that now, at the close of the Civil War, if Americans would not ensure the Negroes real freedom and equal rights, the country must expect in the future new bloodshed. In order for the northern victory to be complete, all shackles must be removed "from freedom's limbs...".[1]

In his answer to the greetings of the First International on the occasion of his re-election as president, Lincoln had written that the Northerners were glad to have the approval and encouragement of the workingmen of Europe. His successor Johnson, however, would not heed the voice of the representatives of the proletariat.

The poet was not always right in his judgements of Federal policies in the South after the Civil War (his quarrel with O'Connor is a sad proof of this), but he remained a humanist and a democrat, devoted to the interests of the masses. He was extremely quick to observe many of the unattractive features of the situation which arose in the North after the war. Whitman was the first American writer to realize that the unprecedented expansion of business enterprises in the United States was accompanied by moral degradation and spiritual decline.

The growing influence of capital in the country after the Union victory was obvious to those capable of looking truth in the face.

In Whitman's youth his homeland had been an agrarian country with weak industrial capacity. After the Civil War the United States began to turn into a mighty industrial power. Progress in industry and technology seemed irrepressible and the enterprising grew rich quickly.

This economic development deluded many Americans into thinking that life would be always "smiling", that the common man was prospering, and any serious social contradictions could be easily resolved.

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[1] *Mainstream*, May, 1963, p. 12.

Walt Whitman was not free of bourgeois illusions either. For a time it seemed to him that if a great art developed in the United States, it would ennoble the heart of every American, and then it would be possible to build a life worthy of man on the basis of the existing social order.

It was not easy for Whitman to overcome these deep-rooted misconceptions and to give up his fond hopes. He could not fully grasp the bourgeois nature of American democracy. He saw it simply as "democracy", democracy in general.

One must bear in mind that for many of the poet's fellow-countrymen, to doubt the virtues of American democracy was an unpatriotic act akin to betraying the principles of the American revolution.

And yet the poet, who even before the Civil War had been sceptical about a civilization which encouraged possessive instincts, who had sympathized with the exploited hired workers, was now able to perceive with astounding clarity many of the real vices of the society which so assiduously pursued money.

The poet was attracted to democracy in the abstract; he did not, I repeat, completely understand that democracy as practised in his native land was bourgeois democracy. But the profound difference between Whitman the democrat and bourgeois liberals who were so influential in the United States, was manifest in the poet's penetrating perception of the defects of capitalist society, in his indignation against money-grubbers, as well as in the fact that his demands on American democracy were extremely high. No wonder he declares in *Democratic Vistas* that the "real gist" of the word democracy "still sleeps".

It pained the poet to criticize the political principles and institutions which he was used to worshiping, but he was true to his conscience.

A new stage began in that endless process of overcoming preconceptions, which, in the final analysis, was the content of Whitman's entire intellectual life. The reality of historical developments in the country forced him more than once to review his old views and attitudes. Together with millions of ordinary Americans he started by overcoming his indifference to slavery. As a result, after long hesitation, he had broken with the Democratic Party, which he had previously regarded as the defender of the common man. At the end of the forties he had

seen through the falseness of the positions held by certain leading Free Soilers. During the war the poet became aware of how pitiful were some of Lincoln's fellow-members of the Republican Party.

But Whitman had to make more reappraisals than ever on the eve of the seventies when the "money-making serpent", in his words, "ate up all the other serpents", and also in the late eighties, a period marking the greatest upsurge of the working class movement in the United States during the whole nineteenth century. At those decisive moments in his country's history the poet, who was no longer young, showed a remarkable capacity for spiritual growth, incisive perception of society and magnificent courage in defense of his convictions.

Only two years after the war, Whitman wrote an article for a new journal *Galaxy* founded in New York. In it he expressed his painful awareness of the spiritual crisis afflicting post-war American society. The article was later incorporated in the book *Democratic Vistas* (1871).

In this book Whitman says that the existing social order had allowed a comparatively small number of people whom he characterizes as "a mob of fashionably dress'd speculators and vulgarians" to concentrate the nation's wealth in their own hands. The dreams of the masses in the United States that their country would become a land of universal equality, prosperity and happiness, had not been realized. To quote *Democratic Vistas*, it had turned out that "society, in these States, is canker'd, crude, superstitious, and rotten. Political, or law-made society is, and private, or voluntary society, is also". In all the undertakings, says Whitman, "the element of the moral conscience, the most important, the verteber to State or man" is "either entirely lacking, or seriously enfeebled or ungrown".

The author leaves no doubt as to where the source of the "rot" lies: "The depravity of the business classes of our country is not less than has been supposed, but infinitely greater.... In business, (the all-devouring modern word, business,) the one sole object is, by any means, pecuniary gain.... I say that our New World democracy, however great a success in uplifting the masses out of their sloughs, in materialistic development, products, and in a certain highly-deceptive superficial popular intellectuality, is, so far, an almost complete failure in its social aspects, and in really grand

religious, moral, literary, and esthetic results. In vain do we march with unprecedented strides to empire.... It is as if we were somehow being endow'd with a vast ... body, and then left with little or no soul."

The first article was followed by a second, but the journal refused to print the third and final article. Obviously the editors were embarrassed by the sharpness of Whitman's social criticism.

The judgements on contemporary life made by the author of *Democratic Vistas* are truly merciless. He sees the appalling spectacle of hypocrisy dominating the country. "From deceit in the spirit, the mother of all false deeds, the offspring is already incalculable."

As he takes a close look at "what is of the only real importance, Personalities," Whitman queries: "Are there, indeed, *men* here worthy the name?... Are there perfect women, to match the generous material luxuriance?... Are there crops of fine youths, and majestic old persons?" None of them can be found. He concludes: "... using the moral microscope upon humanity, a sort of dry and flat Sahara appears...." Writers are full of cynicism and contemptuous irony. In the country which officially made democracy its banner, democratic principles have few real believers.

In *Democratic Vistas* a good deal of attention is devoted to American literature, art and poetry. Whitman justly emphasizes the educative role of poetry, the significance of literature as a force for the spiritual enrichment of man. At the same time, however, the poet propounds the naive idea that good literature alone can exert an influence sufficiently strong to destroy all that is bad in society.

He declares that in order to breathe "the breath recuperative of sane and heroic life" into these "lamentable conditions", a new literature is needed — "not merely to copy and reflect existing surfaces ... not only to amuse, pass away time, celebrate the beautiful, the refined, the past, or exhibit technical, rhythmic, or grammatical dexterity..." but to handle "the elements and forces with competent power, teaching and training men".

Democratic Vistas also expresses the hope that some sort of abstract spirit of comradeship might spring up spontaneously in America, as a result of which the country would be freed of all its shortcomings, and an inspiring principle would be

introduced into the American democracy to combat its vulgar aspects.

Of course, these hopes were utopian. But Whitman was not simply giving himself over to dreams. While affirming the significance of writers as singers of the spirit of "comradeship", he demonstrated in a detailed manner that literary and spiritual life in general in the United States remained gravely underdeveloped.

To fully appreciate the significance of Whitman's sceptical post-war comments about contemporary literature (and poetry in particular), let us consider his long preface to the first edition of *Leaves of Grass.*

The rise of the people's movement on the eve of the Civil War had convinced Whitman that American poetry would soon attain unprecedented heights. The citizens of the United States, he said, possess remarkable human virtues and the country's veins are "full of poetical stuff", in general, the United States is a land of immense poetic possibilities. It most needs poets, and "will doubtless have the greatest and use them the greatest". [1]

In the middle of the nineteenth century Whitman had good reason to anticipate a flowering of American poetry: on the eve of the Civil War, as we know, the United States really had produced several highly gifted poets.

In *Democratic Vistas,* however, Whitman speaks quite differently of poetry in the United States and the general state of American literature and the spiritual life of the country. There are no more exultant prophesies, and notes of bitter disappointment ring out loudly.

Was the author of *Democratic Vistas* right in his critical evaluation of contemporary American poetry and literature as a whole?

In a sense he was quite wrong. At this time Mark Twain was taking his first steps in literature. In the last third of the nineteenth century De Forest, Mark Twain, Crane, Garland, James and Howells were composing works which posterity would duly recognize as classics. But Whitman was aware of the lowering of standards which after the war became apparent in poetry, after the remarkable achievements of previous decades. (It is a startling fact and one that undoubtedly throws

[1] W. Whitman, *Leaves of Grass,* 1928, p. 491.

light on the state of American literature during the "gilded age" that many outstanding works of American poetry were written at the time by the authors "for themselves alone", and were not published. This applies above all to that great poetess of the end of the century, Emily Dickinson. Herman Melville also wrote many poems without hope that his contemporaries would ever know them.)

Although on the eve of the Civil War and during the war such poets as Whittier, Longfellow, Emerson, Bryant and Lowell, inspired by a lofty passion for liberty, had lived through their own "golden age", their creative powers quickly faded and their inspiration subsided.

The democratic American literary critic Vernon Parrington was justified in saying that after the war "the abolition leaders laid aside their pens, convinced that the last injustice had been removed from American society".[1] When the black slave had been freed from his shackles, the "tired" conscience of New England rested on its laurels.

I would go so far as to state that of all the American poets, who before the Civil War produced artistic works of truly high value, Walt Whitman proved to be, if not the only one, then one of the very few, who continued to develop. This was largely because he quickly came to appreciate that the war had by no means eradicated all social injustices in the United States.

In the first years after the war the poet condemned American writers for their estrangement from the people, in whom, as before, he saw great virtues: "When I pass to and fro, different latitudes, different seasons, beholding the crowds of the great cities...," wrote Whitman in *Democratic Vistas*, "when I mix with these interminable swarms of alert, turbulent, good-natured, independent citizens, mechanics, clerks, young persons—at the idea of this mass of men, so fresh and free, so loving and so proud, a singular awe falls upon me. I feel, with dejection and amazement, that among our geniuses and talented writers or speakers, few or none have yet really spoken to this people, created a single image-making work for them, or absorb'd the central spirit and the idiosyncrasies which are theirs—and which, thus, in highest ranges, so far remain entirely uncelebrated, unexpress'd."

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[1] V. L. Parrington, *Main Currents in American Thought*, Vol. III, 1930, p. 51.

And so, "our geniuses", in the writer's ironical expression, do not understand the high human qualities of the working people. Hence, according to *Democratic Vistas*, the weakness of American literature, the inability of most writers to create works addressed to the heart of the average reader and dealing with the most basic problems of life. The poet goes on to say: "... I have not seen a single writer, artist, lecturer, or what not, that has confronted the voiceless but ever erect and active, pervading, underlying will and typic aspiration of the land, in a spirit kindred to itself. Do you call those genteel little creatures American poets? Do you term that perpetual, pistareen, paste-pot work, American art, American drama, taste, verse? I think I hear, echoed as from some mountain-top afar in the West, the scornful laugh of the Genius of these States."

It is true that books continued to be published in the United States in vast numbers. "Many will come under this delusion — but my purpose is to dispel it. I say that a nation may hold and circulate rivers and oceans of very readable print, journals, magazines, novels, library-books, 'poetry', &c — such as the States to-day possess and circulate — of unquestionable aid and value — hundreds of new volumes annually composed and brought out here, respectable enough, indeed unsurpass'd in smartness and erudition — with further hundreds, or rather millions ... also thrown into the market — and yet, all the while, the said nation, land, strictly speaking, may possess no literature at all."

The author of *Democratic Vistas* continues to develop these ideas with growing heat. He says, for instance: "What is the reason our time, our lands, that we see no fresh local courage, sanity, of our own — the Mississippi, stalwart Western men, real mental and physical facts, Southerners, &c, in the body of our literature? especially the poetic part of it ... the grandest events and revolutions, and stormiest passions of history, are crossing to-day with unparallel'd rapidity and magnificence over the stages of our own and all the continents, offering new materials, opening new vistas, with largest needs ... where is the man of letters, where is the book, with any nobler aim than to follow in the old track, repeat what has been said before...?"

Democratic Vistas is dominated not by a nihilistic negation of the achievements of literature in the United States, but by concern for the future of American poetry and prose, and a passionate longing to witness the flowering of artistic life in the

country. Whitman concludes his book by expressing his conviction that "the infant genius of American poetic expression ... lies sleeping far away ... in some western idiom ... or stump-speech ... in some slang or local song or allusion of the Manhattan, Boston, Philadelphia or Baltimore mechanic ... or off in the hut of the California miner ... or on the breasts of the young farmers.... Rude and coarse nursing-beds, these; but only from such beginnings and stocks, indigenous here, may haply arrive, be grafted, and sprout, in time, flowers of genuine American aroma, and fruits truly and fully our own."

The depth of Whitman's democratic feelings is expressed clearly enough in these words.

Tears! Tears! Tears!

It is perfectly natural to expect that a poet who was so clearly aware of the dangers and corruption threatening American democracy, and who was so pained by the suffering of the people around him, should express his feelings, his sense of alarm in verse.

In the mid-sixties Whitman wrote the poem "Ah Poverties, Wincings, and Sulky Retreats" (1865-1866). This appears to be simply an autobiographical narration about the enemies who have overcome him. But the poem reflects features of American reality as a whole.

The heroic has been replaced by the commonplace and the burdensome:

Ah poverties, wincings, and sulky retreats,
Ah you foes that in conflict have overcome me,
(For what is my life or any man's life but a conflict
with foes, the old, the incessant war?)
You degradations, you tussle with passions and
appetites....

Whitman's short poem about poor people (which was not published during the author's lifetime) says that the poet's place in life is among the poor and not among the wealthy.

"The City Dead-House" (1867) unfolds a tragedy whose social character is quite obvious. They have brought to the city dead-house "an outcast form, a poor dead prostitute". "Her corpse they deposit unclaim'd, it lies on the damp brick

pavement...." A human being has died, and this loss is more important than everything else.

The divine woman, her body, I see the body, I look on it alone,
That house once full of passion and beauty, all else I notice not,
Nor stillness so cold, nor running water from faucet, nor odors morbific impress me,
But the house alone — that wondrous house — that delicate fair house — that ruin!
That immortal house more than all the rows of dwellings ever built!...
Unclaim'd, avoided house — take one breath from my tremulous lips,
Take one tear dropt aside as I go for thought of you....

In the poem "On the Beach at Night" (1871) the author urges us to believe in life ("The ravening clouds shall not long be victorious..."). But what torment and crushing weariness there is in the words:

Up through the darkness,
While ravening clouds, the burial clouds, in black masses spreading....

From the beach the child holding the hand of her farther,
Those burial clouds that lower victorious soon to devour all,
Watching, silently weeps.

The lines in which the dark theme of "burial clouds" is developed create an oppressive feeling by their very length and heaviness.

Soon after the war Whitman wrote "Tears" (1867), a sad poem with a rich and highly expressive rhythmical texture. The mournful motif of tears is developed into a complex artistic idea.

The first four lines of this well-known poem are rhythmically similar and they unfold one and the same theme. Although these lines differ widely in the number of syllables, each of

them can be subdivided into three parts, each with a major rhythmic emphasis.

As weariness grows and overcomes the lyrical hero, the long lines begin to sound like groans and the number of major rhythmical stresses increases considerably. The variety of Whitman's rhythms is particularly evident in the last three lines of the poem. First of all there is the story of a man (a "shade") who, hiding his grief, walks by day "so sedate and decorous" with "regulated pace" (this pace is reflected in the rhythmic structure of the line itself). Then follows "night", when none is looking, and it is possible to hide one's real emotions. The short concluding line of the poem, which echoes the opening line, conveys the impression that tears which have long been held back have forced their way to the surface. The American scholar Sculley Bradley spoke of the wave-like rhythm of "Tears".

The lyrical hero of the poem "Wandering at Morn" is also overcome by "gloomy thoughts". But the author concludes the work with an expression of hope. Joyous trills of bird-song will yet "fill the world". "Wandering at Morn" shows more clearly the essentially social nature of the poet's worries. He is worried over "thee coil'd in evil times my country, with craft and black dismay, with every meanness, treason thrust upon thee...".

The conviction expressed by the poet that the repulsive "may to sweet spiritual songs be turn'd" is not an expression of his illusions; it embodies the basic, permanent principle of Whitman's world-outlook—his faith in the ability of the people to change life for the better.

In 1873, when Whitman had fallen seriously ill and it seemed that he would have to devote all his strength to combating his illness, he still spoke out about the unhappy aspects of post-war political life in the United States. In the poem "Nay, Tell Me Not To-day the Publish'd Shame", which appeared in a New York newspaper, Whitman used these pained words:

Nay, tell me not to-day the publish'd shame,
Read not to-day the journal's crowded page,
The merciless reports still branding forehead after
forehead,
The guilty column following guilty column.

The poet had in mind reports about the corruption which was rampant in the capital of the United States and the crimes of persons in responsible positions. And as we might expect, the poet does more than just condemn the upper echelons, the criminal politicians. The life of the simple people is set in contrast to the "publish'd shame". Today I shall turn away from those accounts of crime, exclaims Whitman. "Vital visions rise" before him — "unpublish'd, unreported". The poet celebrates those men and women, who live "healthy lives".

It was in the same year of 1873 that Mark Twain wrote his famous satirical novel, *The Gilded Age*, whose title came to be associated in readers' minds with the whole post-war period, the decades of boom for the American bourgeoisie which began after the Civil War. Twain and his co-author Charles Warner seemed to confirm the justice of what Whitman wrote in *Democratic Vistas*. We do not know whether Twain or Warner had read Whitman's articles in the magazine *Galaxy* which were later to be incorporated in his *Democratic Vistas*. We do know, however, that for a number of years Twain himself worked on this journal

In *The Gilded Age* the greatest American prose writer of the nineteenth century attempted (although this was largely done by his co-author) to counterpose the shady politicians and men of business to men of worth. But the latter proved to be far less convincing than the negative heroes. In *Democratic Vistas* the emphasis is definitely on exposing the questionable practices of the "gilded age". But the major theme of the poem "Nay, Tell Me Not To-day the Publish'd Shame", the strongest in the artistic sense, is the portrayal of the simple people. The poet speaks with deep feeling of the lives and labor of unknown millions. His poem ends with these lines:

Your million untold manly healthy lives, or East or
West, city or country,
Your noiseless mothers, sisters, wives, unconscious of
their good...
Your self-distilling, never-ceasing virtues, self-denials,
graces...
Your blessings steadily bestow'd, sure as the light,
and still...
These, these to-day I brood upon — all else refusing,
these will I con,
To-day to these give audience.

Poetry for Whitman above all meant affirming those things that bring joy and faith to life and point the way to the future, though he did not ignore the shameful, tragic and criminal facts of reality.

"The Unperform'd ... Advance Upon Me"

When the war between the North and the South drew to a close, the poet began to write works which expressed not only his satisfaction that victory had been won, but also the awareness that the people faced new goals and new tasks.

In the poem "Years of the Modern" (written in 1865, the year the war ended) Whitman calls America the land of Liberty, but he is disturbed about "the unperform'd". For:

> *Never were such sharp questions ask'd as this day,*
> *Never was average man, his soul, more energetic, more like a God...*

And the poet feels that "the unperform'd, more gigantic than ever, advance, advance upon me."

Whitman's poem, "Turn O Libertad" (also written in 1865) is concerned with the "wars to come" on behalf of freedom. They should not be feared, says the poet, since the future is "greater than all the past".

While many American writers abandoned revolutionary themes after the Civil War, Whitman, who had reacted so passionately to the 1848 revolutions, also greeted the revolutionary struggle which developed in the world in the last third of the nineteenth century.

The poet did not find it easy to grasp the sense of the war between Germany and France, but as early as September 1870 he wrote: "... Louis Napoleon fully deserves his fate — I consider him by far the meanest scoundrel (with all his smartness) that ever sat on a throne. I make a distinction however — I admire & love the French, & France as a nation — of all foreign nations, she has my sympathy first of all." [1]

The significance of France for Whitman even after the war is shown by lines like these from the poem "O Star of France, 1870-71":

[1] W. Whitman, *The Correspondence*, Vol. II, p. 110.

Dim smitten star,
Orb not of France alone, pale symbol of my soul, its dearest hopes,
The struggle and the daring, rage divine for liberty,
Of aspirations toward the far ideal, enthusiast's dreams of brotherhood,
Of terror to the tyrant and the priest.

The poem "O Star of France" appeared in print in June 1871. We may assume that the poet wrote it when the enemies of the Paris Commune were already tightening their grip, preparing to choke the life out of it.

Whitman takes a tragic view of the fate of France. He sees a "livid face", "pierced hands and feet", "the spear thrust" in its side. The poet speaks wrathfully of "traitors" who sold the "crucified" star.

But, as always, he believes in the ultimate victory of the revolutionary masses. Arising from "deathly fire and turbulent chaos", France will once again issue "in perfect power and beauty".

In this poem Whitman expresses an extremely bold idea. France has been able to do what no other nation has yet achieved: "... alone among thy sisters thou, giantess, didst rend the ones that shamed thee...", refusing to "wear the usual chains...".

In the poem "Spain, 1873-74" (1873), Whitman speaks of the Spanish people's struggle for liberty; and he makes it clear that revolutionary struggles will arise in other countries as well. Everywhere freedom is waiting for her time to come.

The readiness of the poet's "contentious" spirit to further struggles for justice (although the Civil War was already over) is apparent in the poem "Adieu to a Soldier", written in the early seventies. It contains such inspired lines:

Adieu dear comrade,
Your mission is fulfill'd — but I, more warlike,
Myself and this contentious soul of mine,
Still on our own campaigning bound,
Through untried roads with ambushes opponents lined,
Through many a sharp defeat and many a crisis, often baffled,

Here marching, ever marching on, a war fight out—
aye here,
To fiercer, weightier battles give expression.

"The Mystic Trumpeter" is one of the finest creations of Whitman's genius. Like the poem "O Star of France" it was written about the time of the Paris Commune. Anne Gilchrist's daughter recalled that Whitman, who rarely read his own verses aloud, loved to declaim this poem when he came to stay with them. There is no doubt that "The Mystic Trumpeter" was one of the works which he loved best.

The German writer Arnold Zweig once said that Whitman's work was imbued with the same passion for freedom, justice and joy that Beethoven expressed in the magnificent language of music. And these words are perhaps more applicable to "The Mystic Trumpeter" than to any other of the American poet's works.

In no other poem written after the Civil War did Whitman express so clearly and firmly his protest against the social evil dominating the world.

The "wild trumpeter", the "strange musician" is, of course, the poet himself. He is capable of creating a free and clear melody, in his music one hears of love, "crimson, sumptuous, sick with perfume".

But not only is the poet "floating and basking upon heaven's lake". The trumpeter knows about everything that goes on in the world. The past, the present and the future pass before us. There was a time when "trumpeters" hailed feudal tournaments. But now the poet is occupied more by present-day events than by the past. There is much in our life that is sad, even terrible. Whitman exclaims:

O trumpeter, methinks I am myself the instrument thou
playest,
Thou melt'st my heart, my brain—thou movest, drawest,
changest them at will;
And now thy sullen notes send darkness through me,
Thou takest away all cheering light, all hope....

The poem contains pictures which arouse anguish and protest: the poet sees "grime-faced cannoneers", he observes "deeds of ruthless brigands, rapine, murder". The trumpe-

ter sings a terrible song of war. Social evil in all its aspects appears before the reader. The poet exclaims:

I see the enslaved, the overthrown, the hurt, the
oppprest of the whole earth,
I feel the measureless shame and humiliation of my race,
it becomes all mine,
Mine too the revenges of humanity, the wrongs of ages,
baffled feuds and hatreds,
Utter defeat upon me weighs — all lost — the foe victorious....

The poet's reference to "defeat" probably had something to do with the events which had taken place not long before in his beloved France. The idea of the "shame and humiliation of my race", we may assume, was produced by his perception of what was taking place in his own homeland after the war.

Of course, even in this poem Whitman did not abandon that most important feature of his work, his social optimism. He tried to express as fully as possible his philosophy of life in the new circumstances of post-war America. The tragic words "the foe victorious" are countered by two proud lines set in parentheses:

(Yet 'mid the ruins Pride colossal stands unshaken
to the last,
Endurance, resolution to the last.)

But Whitman does not stop at this. The poem "The Mystic Trumpeter" is not simply one more expression of the poet's faith in the possibility of gaining the upper hand over those who cast shame on the people, those who are guilty of tyranny. The work also contains a magnificent hymn to an infinitely better future, the most beautiful hymn in praise of liberated mankind which Whitman ever composed.

In the last stanza of the poem, the author makes use of repetitions, parallelisms, words which simultaneously serve as rhymes and are leitmotifs, sharp division of the line into rhythmic units and many other expressive devices typical of his art — and all in order to incarnate in beautiful melodies the bright hope of the working people living in a future world, where misery no longer reigns supreme.

Starting from his experience of the American people's life and drawing on the revolutionary traditions of Europe, Whitman brings new artistic content to bear on romantic motifs which had been heard already in the poetry of Percy Bysshe Shelley.

The ideal expressed by Whitman has something in common with the picture of the future in "Prometheus Unbound". At the same time, "The Mystic Trumpeter" scintillates with highly original poetic colors. The poet exclaims:

O glad, exulting, culminating song!
A vigor more than earth's is in thy notes,
Marches of victory — man disenthral'd — the conqueror at last,
Hymns to the universal God from universal man — all joy!
A reborn race appears — a perfect world, all joy!
Women and men in wisdom innocence and health — all joy!
Riotous laughing bacchanals fill'd with joy!
War, sorrow, suffering gone — the rank earth purged — nothing but joy left!
The ocean fill'd with joy — the atmosphere all joy!
Joy! joy! in freedom, worship, love! joy in the ecstasy of life!
Enough to merely be! enough to breathe!
Joy! joy! all over joy!

After the Civil War, Whitman's revolutionary feelings grew even stronger. "The Mystic Trumpeter" bears witness to that, as does a special section that appeared in the 1871 edition of *Leaves of Grass*, entitled "Songs of Insurrection". In the rough copy of the introduction to this cycle the poet wrote that the ideas in "Songs of Insurrection" "will always be needed", for the "insidious grip of capital" [1] is making itself increasingly felt in the United States. In his old age the poet recalled how at the end of the sixties and beginning of the seventies he was often visited by socialist workers who would "talk and talk, sometimes like a house afire, of their enthusiasms...". The poet called such people "the hope, the sole hope"[2] of American democracy.

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[1] *Whitman's Workshop*, p. 229.
[2] H. Traubel, *With Walt Whitman in Camden*, 1915, p. 187.

We should recall that before the Civil War, Whitman would occasionally exaggerate, in a romantic spirit, the virtues of his contemporaries, but at other times would soberly consider the capabilities of his countrymen, noting their human shortcomings (although he never abandoned his faith in the basic goodness of human nature, an attitude inherited from representatives of the eighteen-century enlightenment). All these elements are also present in various combinations and proportions in his post-war poetry. But while in the fifties the poet had merely contrasted the vices of the money-grubbers with the spiritual greatness of the farmers and craftsmen, in the seventies and eighties he came to consider more and more often the role of the workers in the life of society. Whitman was beginning to perceive the deepening conflict between labor and capital.

The unprecedented successes of industry and technology in the United States after the Civil War inevitably forced Whitman to return to the problem which had concerned him earlier—the problem of perception and evaluation of the civilization of his time.

"Fierce-Throated Beauty"

The poet's deep love of nature, which grew ever more passionate and tender with years, did not prevent him (nor his contemporary, Mark Twain) from evincing, during the last decades of his life, an interest and respect for America's achievements in science and industry.

Herman Melville once characterized the locomotive, that symbol of technical progress and the achievements in nineteenth-century material culture, as an iron monstrosity.

Thoreau's attitude towards the railroads was rather contradictory. Sometimes he spoke fairly respectfully of the locomotive, but more often dwelled on the terrible human cost of railway construction. In *Walden* he even expressed doubt that railroads were at all needed by humanity.

Whitman was a stranger to such thoughts and feelings. He never regarded machines as monsters, as instruments of evil. On the contrary, the poet sang of the locomotive as the incarnation of beauty and joy.

Leaves of Grass contains a poem called "To a Locomotive in Winter" (1876). This is an exultant hymn in honor of the railroad, of technology and industry. It begins as follows:

Thee for my recitative,
Thee in the driving storm even as now, the snow, the winter-day declining,
Thee in thy panoply, thy measur'd dual throbbing and thy beat convulsive,
Thy black cylindric body, golden brass and silvery steel....

Whitman does not see any insoluble contradiction between the locomotive and nature, between material civilization and poetry. He exclaims:

Type of the modern—emblem of motion and power—pulse of the continent,
For once come serve the Muse and merge in verse, even as here I see thee....

Fierce-throated beauty!
Roll through my chant with all thy lawless music, thy swinging lamps at night,
Thy madly-whistled laughter, echoing, rumbling like an earthquake, rousing all,
Law of thyself complete, thine own track firmly holding,
(No sweetness debonair of tearful harp or glib piano thine,)
Thy trills of shrieks by rocks and hills return'd,
Launch'd o'er the prairies wide, across the lakes,
To the free skies unpent and glad and strong

This does not mean, however, that Walt Whitman had no doubts whatsoever about the value of contemporary progress in material production. While acknowledging the cunning creations of man's mind and hands, he saw after the war more clearly than in his earlier years that the progress of technology (under the conditions of his day) involved much that was detrimental to the workers.

True, at times Whitman gave way to the tendency typical of so many of his contemporaries, that of idealizing the achievements of American technology. This can be seen in particular

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in his poems "Song of the Exposition" (1871) and "Passage to India" (1868).

The first of these works was commissioned by the organizers of one of the numerous exhibitions held in the United States to demonstrate the successes of industry and agriculture.

The French poet Pottier, who had supported the Paris Commune, happened to visit a fair in Philadelphia. He was impressed by American industrial progress, but made several highly critical remarks about the role of big property owners in the lives of ordinary American workers. Whitman was not able at the time to write about the contradictions of bourgeois progress in such a crystal-clear manner.

But the poem "Song of the Exposition" is anything but just an apotheosis of capitalism. Whitman speaks respectfully of human labor. Represented at the exhibition will be, in his words, "not only all the world of works, trade, products,/But all the workmen of the world...".

The poem also expresses hatred for war:

> *Away with themes of war! away with war itself!*
> *Hence from my shuddering sight to never more return that*
> *show of blacken'd, mutilated corpses!*
> *That hell unpent and raid of blood....*

Instead of military campaigns, says the poet, let there be "industry's campaigns", let "engineering" deploy its "undaunted armies" and pennants be "loosen'd to the breeze" by labor.

Further on the poet refers to that which for him is the most important thing: he speaks of the people who greet the muse, that "migrates" from ancient Greece and comes to the land of industry—"a better, fresher, busier sphere". But is it also a land where human beings became better, spiritually superior?

At first Whitman claims that in the industrial country mirrored by the exposition, "a queer, queer race of novel fashion" has appeared; later he seems to contradict himself:

> *... the same old human race, the same within, without,*
> *Faces and hearts the same, feelings the same, yearnings*
> *the same....*

The source of this contradiction lies in important shifts which had occurred in Whitman's views. There was a time

when he claimed that Americans had become higher and nobler than at any time in the past. But in *Democratic Vistas*, which was published (in full) at the same time as "Song of the Exposition", the poet at times describes his contemporaries in sceptic tones.

Though many fine pictures of human labor are found in "Song of the Exposition", the poem cannot be called a fully integrated whole. It must also be admitted that there are several lines which sound like quotations from an advertisement.

Technological progress also served as the impetus for the poem "Passage to India". The poet was excited by the completion of the first transcontinental railway in the United States and of the Suez Canal. The poem begins like this:

> *Singing my days,*
> *Singing the great achievements of the present,*
> *Singing the strong light works of engineers....*

Whitman expresses the hope that the achievements of the engineers will finally bring various nations closer together. But "Passage to India" must be regarded as one of the poet's weaker works. He expressed his faith in industry and in the future of technological progress with the greatest artistry in his poem about the "fierce-throated beauty".

A Tragic Year

At the beginning of 1873, during the night of the 22nd-23rd of January, Whitman woke before dawn to realize that he could not move his left arm or his left leg.

Three days later, in a letter to his mother, Whitman told her he had had "a slight stroke of paralysis" and had "been laid up since".

The first letter from Whitman to his mother in which he spoke of his illness was sent on Sunday and concluded with these words: "I will write again middle of the week",[1] but he began to write to her almost every day.

It was not customary for the Whitmans to hide the truth from one another. Walt did not pretend that the symptoms of

[1] W. Whitman, *The Correspondence*, Vol. II, p. 192.

his illness were quickly disappearing, but willingly shared with his mother all the signs of his gradual recovery.

His friends rallied around the poet in his misfortune. Doyle and Eldridge in turn spent long hours at his bed-side. O'Connor's wife also helped the sick man in a great many ways. Nelly, wrote Whitman in one of his letters, was sitting in his room, darning his socks and underwear.

The poet was visited by Burroughs and other people dear to him (at this time he had already fallen out with William O'Connor).

But Whitman's thoughts were above all with his mother. She had gone to her son George, who lived in Camden. A son's love for his mother, even if the son is already old and gray, is not unusual; but the love which united the poet and Louisa Whitman was of a rare quality.

And it was in this same tragic year that Walt Whitman lost his mother. Earlier, the poet, who was suffering acutely from his physical disability (while maintaining all his mental faculties), had been shaken by the death of his beloved sister-in-law, Jeff's wife Martha.

Martha Whitman died at the end of February, leaving two orphaned children, and in the middle of May the poet wrote despairingly: "Mother, I am afraid you are more unwell than you say...."[1]

The last words written by this barely literate woman show how dear the second of her sons was to her: "farewell my beloved sons farewell," wrote Louisa Van Velsor Whitman. "i have lived beyond all comfort in this world. dont mourn for me my beloved sons and daughters. farewell my dear beloved walter".[2]

In the middle of May the poet had sufficiently recovered from his stroke to make a trip to Camden, where his mother spent her last days.

Abby Price's daughter Helen recalled the occasion of the funeral. The poet was alone in the room in which Louisa Whitman's coffin stood. He held a stick in his hands and from time to time he lifted it slightly and let it fall back to the floor with a heavy thud.

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[1] W. Whitman, *The Correspondence*, Vol. II, p. 219.

[2] Ibid., p. 220.

A month later in a letter to John Burroughs and his wife Whitman wrote: "I feel that the blank in my life & heart left by the death of my mother is what will never to me be filled."[1]

In the months which followed events conspired to make the poet feel even more keenly the loss he had suffered.

His health improved extremely slowly. A month after the death of the poet's mother Eldridge wrote to Burroughs in alarm: "I begin to doubt whether Walt is going to recover.... He is a mere physical wreck to what he was...."[2]

Although Whitman put on a brave face in his letters, and in his conversations with his friends said he was sure that he would recover, he was often overcome by despair.

From a remark which the poet made in a letter to Nelly O'Connor, we can see that the thought of approaching death haunted him throughout that year. Apologizing to his friend for losing some letter, the poet explains that not only has he moved, but has also destroyed a large number of letters and manuscripts, so as to be ready for what might happen.

After Louisa Whitman's death George and his wife invited their brother to live in their house in Camden and occupy their mother's two small rooms. It would seem that this was the best way out for the sick and almost helpless man that Walt Whitman had become in his fifties.

George undoubtedly shared many of the virtues of the Whitman family. He was hardworking and kind. He had fought for four years against the southern slave owners. The poet was proud of his brother, and they were bound by ties of genuine brotherly affection.

During the Civil War Louisa Whitman had often mentioned George's generosity in her letters to Walt. George had been sending his mother a large part of his officer's salary and allowed her to use the money almost at her own discretion.

Soon after the war, however, Louisa began to write about her son George in a rather different tone. She had always been careful with money and yet she complained more and more often to Walt about George's miserliness. Her son was giving her money only when she asked for it, and it was so unpleasant to ask.

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[1] Ibid., p. 225.

[2] Ibid., pp. 222-23.

Louisa's letters became more insistently critical after she moved to Camden. Much of this, of course, can be explained by her jealousy of her daughter-in-law, who was naturally the mistress of the house in George Whitman's home. But obviously there was some truth in the words which Louisa Whitman wrote two months before her death: "george is a good man but i dont think i ever saw any one so changed. he used to be so generous and free but now he is very saving, never goes out any where." [1]

The feeling of depression which had taken hold of Louisa Whitman can be seen in her appeals to Walt to buy a little house of his own where the three of them could live independently — the mother, the poet and his retarded brother Eddy.

After the war George took little interest in anything except his business. Walt Whitman once said mockingly that George was interested in tobacco pipes, but not at all in poetry.

When, in early autumn of the same year (1873), Jeff arrived in Camden, it turned out that this brother had also turned into a typical businessman.

In a conversation with Traubel about fifteen years later, Whitman remarked that he had always been a stranger to his relatives, just like Lev Tolstoy. Who in my family has sided with me, the poet asked himself sorrowfully.

Whitman now had almost nothing to talk about with people like George and Jeff. He preferred to be as far away from them as possible. After the death of Jeff's wife his correspondence with Jeff ceased almost completely. When George built a new house and offered Walt a fine room with a large window, he chose one higher up, in the attic, in order to feel more free. Here, he wrote to Doyle, it was "much more retired".

While his mother was alive, she was the poet's favorite correspondent, but after Louisa Whitman passed away he wrote most willingly to Peter Doyle. It was with Peter, a simple, uncomplicated, sincere man, that Whitman shared his sufferings during his hardest moments. Sometimes Walt could not bring himself to tell the whole truth even to Doyle, not wishing to cause him pain.

Doyle did everything that he could for the poet who had become his adopted father. He carried out his simple errands,

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[1] W. Whitman, *The Correspondence*, Vol. II, p. 207.

sending him such and such a newspaper, or some things he had left in Washington. The correspondence expanded in scope. Whitman sent the young man a few dollars on Christmas, so that he could buy himself winter shoes or warm underwear, and thanked his correspondent for the news about people and happenings in Washington.

Whitman's feeling of isolation grew stronger. The poet's letters now often contain bitter words about his anguish. Whitman suffered not only because his mother had died; he was oppressed by a serious illness and worried about the future. A letter to Doyle reveals yet another reason for the gloomy feeling which gripped the poet. "My sister-in-law," wrote Whitman, "is very kind in all housekeeping things, cooks what I want, has first-rate coffee for me & something nice in the morning, & keeps me a good bed & room — All of which is very acceptable — (then, for a fellow, of my size, the *friendly presence & magnetism needed,* somehow, is not here—...)."[1]

His brother's house and Camden in general failed to provide the poet with the friendship he needed. In a letter to friends in New York he wrote, "I find myself *very* (underscored twice.— *M.M.*) *lonesome* here... (Man cannot live on *bread alone,* can he?)...".[2]

Doyle was not his sole correspondent. Whitman also wrote to Anne Gilchrist, the Burroughs, Abby Price, Eldridge, Rossetti, Nelly O'Connor. Through Nelly he maintained some form of link with O'Connor too. Whitman was glad, for instance, when his former friend, whom he undoubtebly still loved (though O'Connor was angry that the poet's views on the post-war situation of the Negroes were insufficiently radical) was appointed to a high-ranking post in a government office.

In his letters to all these enlightened people, the poet discussed much that he could not write about to Doyle with his scanty education. At the same time Whitman continued his creative work. Towards the end of 1873 he had two new poems ready (they appeared in 1874 in *Harper's*).

But all this was insufficient for the author of *Leaves of Grass.* He could not be happy without daily personal contact with the people who were dear to him. Camden lacked that friendly atmosphere which Whitman needed as much as air to breathe.

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[1] Ibid., p. 245.
[2] Ibid., p. 267.

There is a poem in *Leaves of Grass* called "I Saw in Louisiana a Live-Oak Growing" (1860). It expresses in memorable images the basis of Whitman's philosophy of life:

I saw in Louisiana a live-oak growing,
All alone stood it and the moss hung down from the branches,
Without any companion it grew there uttering joyous leaves of dark green,
And its look, rude, unbending, lusty, made me think of myself,
But I wonder'd how it could utter joyous leaves standing alone there without its friend near, for I knew I could not....

A constant and insatiable desire for comradeship was an essential part of Whitman's life. The torments which the poet suffered in the seventies, the darkest period of his life, were caused to a great extent by the absence of friends around him.

True to his sympathies, Whitman made friends with an ordinary railroad worker in Camden, a certain Tom Osler. Their friendship was short-lived, however, for this young worker was killed instantly in an accident at work. The simple story of their friendship deserves some attention, for it is typical of Whitman. As the poet related in his letters to Doyle, he had fallen into the habit of sitting by the window on the ground floor. "Tom would often stop a few minutes & talk to me at the window, on his way to & from the depot — He would never come in the house...."[1] This young man probably never realized that the old man he had taken such a liking to was a poet.

Another local resident decided to visit Whitman precisely because he was the author of *Leaves of Grass.* In the beginning of 1873 Whitman wrote Doyle that he had "had a visit from a good, kind-hearted, rather queer old fellow named Ingram".[2] He had sought the poet out in Camden to offer him material help. "So you see there are good souls left...,"[3] Whitman

[1] W. Whitman, *The Correspondence,* Vol. II, p. 253.
[2] Ibid., p. 231.
[3] Ibid., p. 232.

concluded. Many years later he described Ingram as a man "of the Thomas Paine stripe—full of benevolent impulses, of radicalism, of the desire to alleviate the sufferings of the world...".[1]

The poet spent the Christmas of 1873 absolutely alone (his brother and his wife had gone to stay with friends for three days). At the beginning of the next year, he informed Pete that he was already fit enough not only to leave the house, but even to cross the Delaware by ferry to reach Philadelphia. The workers on the ferries were very polite and respectful.

The trips across the river reminded Whitman of his youth. As in those long past pre-war days, his place on the ferry was beside the pilot. The poet also got to know a few more workers from Camden. He lists them in one letter as postmen, conductors, cabmen, etc., all of whom, he says, are fine people.

Whitman joyfully informed Nelly that his sister-in-law's sister had arrived with her baby for a visit. She had a pleasant contralto voice, and sang beautifully, without being conscious of her talent. The poet did not lose the ability to love people even in the most difficult months of his life, when he sometimes thought of death as deliverance.

The tragic year of 1873 is reflected in Whitman's "Prayer of Columbus". Informing Nelly O'Connor in February, 1874, that the work was to be published in one of the forthcoming issues of *Harper's*, the poet added: "I shouldn't wonder if I have unconsciously put a sort of autobiographical dash in it...."[2]

"Prayer of Columbus" is one of Whitman's saddest poems. At the end of his days Columbus, "a batter'd, wreck'd old man", is thrown on a "savage shore, far, far from home...". The mariner's end is near, and he does not know whether or not he has done anything really worth while.

We would expect the poem to conclude on a note of doubt. But Whitman remains true to himself. The last lines of the poem glorify Columbus' achievement. The dying old man suddenly has a vision:

> *And on the distant waves sail countless ships,*
> *And anthems in new tongues I hear saluting me.*

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[1] Ibid., p. 231.
[2] Ibid., p. 272.

The year 1873 had come to an end. But the poet had no cause to rejoice.

Whitman requested the president that his job in Washington be kept for him, but a few months later he was dismissed from government service. His source of constant income had finally and irrevocably disappeared, and the poet's material dependence on his brother became absolute. Meanwhile Whitman's physical condition left much to be desired.

"This Is the Way We Encourage Poets and Patriots"

Now that Whitman's only source of income — aside from help from his family and friends — was his writing, he felt more keenly than ever the precariousness of his position.

Soon after the Civil War Bayard Taylor, a poet well-known in his time but now almost forgotten, sent Whitman several letters expressing a very favourable opinion of his work. Taylor was delighted by the expressiveness of *Leaves of Grass*, and by its glorification of love. But within a few years Taylor began to mock Whitman's poetry without mercy.

Taylor's opinion (and that of many of his colleagues) of *Leaves of Grass* was expressed in some satirical dialogues which he published when the poet was still living. They claimed that Whitman had only half a dozen followers in the United States. His poems, continued the author of the dialogues, "have a kind of poetical charm" for foreigners just "because they are not understood".[1]

Emerson was also becoming more and more irritated by the poet's work.

In the early seventies John Burroughs entered in his diary an account of a conversation with Whitman in the course of which he found out about Emerson's meeting with a certain Marvin. Emerson told Marvin: "Walt sends me all his books. But tell Walt I am not satisfied — not satisfied. I expect — him — to make — the songs of the Nation — but he seems — to be contented to — make the inventories."[2]

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[1] *The Shock of Recognition*, p. 406.

[2] Ibid., pp. 276-77.

Incidentally, the works Whitman wrote during and just after the war contain incomparably fewer "inventories" than the first edition of *Leaves of Grass* which had enraptured Emerson.

Soon after his stroke, the poet discovered that Emerson had not included a single one of his works in an anthology of poetry he had compiled. The anthology included verses by quite a few third-rate poets, but Whitman was conspicuously absent.

In his book *Days with Walt Whitman* the English author Edward Carpenter gives an account of a conversation he had with Emerson concerning the author of *Leaves of Grass*. "When I spoke of Whitman and asked what he thought of him, he laughed (a little nervously, I thought) and said, 'Well, I thought he had some merit at one time: there was a good deal of promise in his first edition — but he is a wayward fanciful man.'"

"... He went on in words which I do not recall, to object to the absence of meter in *Leaves of Grass*; and ended, I remember, by taking down a volume by Tennyson from the shelf — handling it affectionately and showing me the author's autograph on the fly-leaf and dwelling on the beauty of the Tennysonian diction and meter." [1]

The *New York Tribune*, which had once published and praised Whitman's verse, now attacked him with transparent insinuations. It reported, for instance, that Whitman's friends had secured the dismissal of the father of a large family from a government post so that the poet might have the job.

The two poems which Whitman had managed to print in *Harper's* shortly after his stroke did not make the "big press" any more accessible. For the next two years he was unable to publish a single long work in the "respectable" journals.

In 1876 the poet sadly remarked that now neither the *Atlantic Monthly* nor *Scribner's* nor *Galaxy* nor even *Harper's* wanted to publish him. Worse still, some publications sent his works back with insulting comments.

Can we explain all this (as many of Whitman's biographers do) simply by the fact that his poems spoke of physical love more frankly than was then regarded as acceptable in America?

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[1] Ibid., p. 278.

Hardly. All (or almost all) of the poet's works dealing with physical love were written before the war and not during or after it, whereas it was precisely after the war that Emerson, Lowell and several other influential American writers and editors condemned Whitman more and more often.

The reasons are to be sought, it seems to me, in the shift towards conservatism taken at the time by many of the literary men in New England and other parts of the country. Whitman, however, remained faithful to the democratic and revolutionary ideals of the decade before the war.

As in the past, the poet published new editions of *Leaves of Grass* at his own expense, paying for the printing costs out of his own meagre means.

As a rule, the American press met his books with silence or else with abusive reviews. The poet could not even persuade the bookstores in Philadelphia to sell *Leaves of Grass*, though one of them was selling copies printed — without payment of any royalties to the author — by a crooked businessman who had stolen part of the third edition of Whitman's collection.

By preparing a two-volume edition of verse and prose for the hundredth anniversary of the Declaration of Independence, Whitman hoped to receive enough "for grub, pocket money, &," as he wrote to one correspondent in November 1875, adding that he had come to the end of his rope and was "ridiculously poor".[1]

But his hopes that the two-volume edition could be widely circulated were not to be realized either.

About half-way through the seventies the Camden newspaper the *West Jersey Press* published an article about the position of Walt Whitman, written, American literary critics suppose, by the poet himself. The article stated that although Whitman remained cheerful and good-natured, his situation was extremely difficult. Not a single respectable publisher was prepared to print his books.

The article, appearing as it did in a small provincial newspaper, had not the slightest influence on the poet's compatriots, and his material situation remained unchanged. Whitman could hardly make ends meet. But, as before, he had to pay for Eddy's keep; not one of his family wanted to have

[1] W. Whitman, *The Correspondence*, Vol. II, p. 343.

Eddy in the house, and they gave him out to a needy farming family.

When the poet decided in early 1877 to give a lecture in honor of Thomas Paine, only a handful of people came to listen to him. It is not hard to understand Whitman's feelings as he gazed out at the few listeners seated in a hall which could hold a thousand people.

Though the Americans continued to pay little attention to Walt Whitman's work, the article in the *West Jersey Press* helped to bring the poet's plight to the attention of the English public.

Whitman sent a clipping from the paper to William Rossetti, who reprinted the article in one of the English periodicals. Several days later several newspapers in England responded to the news of the poet's plight with indignant leading articles.

The British decided to raise a collection for the American poet (motivated, apart from all else, by a malicious desire to spite the Americans).

This only gave the newspapers in the United States a new reason for attacking the poet. Only O'Connor and Burroughs spoke out publicly in his defense.

The history of the English readers' acquaintance with *Leaves of Grass* has several curious aspects.

When copies of the first edition of *Leaves of Grass* (distributed by a London book firm) were left unsold, they fell into the hands of a travelling book-peddler. He sold the volume to a simple workman, Thomas Dixon, who proved to be a truly remarkable man. This Dixon had founded an art school and a free library in his town. The famous English art critic and philosopher John Ruskin immortalized Dixon's name in some of his works.

Leaves of Grass made a tremendous impression on Dixon. He sensed in Whitman's poetry an echo of his own feelings and attitudes. From the late sixties onwards Dixon and Whitman exchanged letters. Dixon wrote to the poet: "I love nearly all the Men thou lovest, and all the Books and thoughts that seem congenial to thee, long hath been so to me."[1] This Englishman's profound appreciation of the most important qualities of *Leaves of Grass* is reflected in his letter to Whitman written in September, 1874. He remarks that the author of *Leaves of Grass* is striving to create a more noble life, and continues: "... so

[1] Ibid., p. 99.

many souls laboring for one end, must someday effect the accomplishment of the 'Golden Days' so long sung, so long toiled for, prayed for—and fought for!"[1]

To hasten the coming of the "Golden Days", Dixon considered it his duty to help distribute *Leaves of Grass* in England. In the mid-seventies he informed Whitman with restrained pride that he had sent copies of the book to various libraries in the big industrial centers of England.

Earlier still Dixon had, through one of his friends, acquainted William Rossetti with Whitman's poetry.

It was Rossetti who both edited and published a volume of Whitman's work shortly after the end of the Civil War, thus making the poet's work available to European readers. Many of Whitman's most famous admirers in England, France, Germany and Russia first became acquainted with his poetry by way of this collection. For instance, the German poet Ferdinand Freiligrath (who was living at the time in England) drew on the London edition of Walt Whitman's book in preparing his translations of the poet's works and an article on him.

The collection edited by Rossetti did not contain several of those works which had evoked the sternest censure on the part of puritanical readers and critics. When Whitman found out about this he was upset, but decided to let it be.

As before, the poet was convinced that there was nothing "indecent" in his work. In a letter written to Rossetti in late 1867 he emphasized that he would not countenance an expurgated edition of his poems. Whitman's two-volume edition of 1876, which was sold at an unusually high price in England and temporarily eased the poet's material situation, retained absolutely all the poems whose exclusion had been demanded by the defenders of "morality".

The poet demonstrated his firmness in an especially dramatic manner when a new edition of *Leaves of Grass* was published in 1881.

One of Whitman's friends persuaded James Osgood, the owner of a Boston publishing firm, to undertake an expanded edition of the poet's verse. The work on the book moved fast. Issued under the mark of the Osgood publishing firm, *Leaves of Grass* was dated 1881-1882, but apparently the book was

[1] W. Whitman, *The Correspondence*, Vol. II, p. 100.

already on sale in 1881. Osgood was fairly well satisfied by public demand for the volume. It looked as if Whitman could at last consider himself a poet worthy of attention in the publishing world.

In March 1882, however, the district attorney of Boston issued a protest against the publication of *Leaves of Grass*, declaring it to be "obscene". Osgood discovered which poems had displeased the district attorney and suggested to the poet that he should issue a new, censored edition of *Leaves of Grass*. The district attorney objected particularly strongly to the poem "To a Common Prostitute" (1860). If Whitman consented to omit this and one more poem from the book, said the publisher in a letter to the author, "we think the matter can be arranged without any other serious changes".[1]

Osgood was fully confident of achieving his goal. But Whitman did not accept his proposal.

Here is the beginning of the touching poem that aroused the indignation of the Boston official:

Be composed — be at ease with me — I am Walt
Whitman, liberal and lusty as Nature,
Not till the sun excludes you do I exclude you,
Not till the waters refuse to glisten for you and the
leaves to rustle for you, do my words
refuse to glisten and rustle for you.

These sincere and humane sentiments testify to the democratic views of a poet who saw in the pariahs of society the victims of a monstrous social environment, deserving consideration and pity.

Soon after the Civil War F. Sanborn compared the way in which the most important American publishers treated Whitman, and the way they treated some author of a fourth-rate novel in praise of the cause of slavery. This novel was published and widely advertised in the North. The critic, faithful to the noble traditions of the abolitionist movement, came to a very bitter conclusion: this "is the way we encourage poets and patriots...".[2]

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[1] W. Whitman, *The Correspondence*, Vol. III, p. 271.
[2] G. W. Allen, *The Solitary Singer*, p. 368.

The poet understood perfectly well that his refusal to compromise with the censors and with Osgood would not only mean frustration of the great hopes he had placed on the 1881 edition of *Leaves of Grass,* but would also occasion a new outburst of slander against him. And yet he stood firmly by his convictions. In 1882 Whitman signed an agreement with Osgood's firm excusing the publisher from all responsibility for the future printing of *Leaves of Grass.* The author was given the print matrices, the unbound copies of his book and a small sum of money.

The majority of press comments on the action of the Boston district attorney could only have confirmed the impression that Whitman was an immoral poet who spread every possible form of vice.

Of course, one should not idealize the author of *Leaves of Grass.* It would be naive to think that he was always fair with everyone and was on every occasion imperturbably calm, balanced and affectionate. Old age did not mellow Whitman, and after the Civil War he was often sarcastic and bitter.

But the poet possessed a marvelous ability to subdue in himself all that was petty, inessential and unworthy. His diaries contain demands, addressed to himself, to change this very hour, to correct himself at any price, etc. The poet continued to radiate powerful magnetism. It was the magnetism of an unfeigned interest in people and of endless benevolence, and it found an echo in the reader.

More and more often now the poet received various men of letters, both American and foreign, and more lively descriptions have been preserved of the aged Whitman than of the poet in the flower of manhood. This allows us to judge more accurately what sort of person he was in his last years.

At the end of the sixties an Englishman, Justin McCarthy,decided to check the accusations that Whitman was only acting the role of a penniless poet — the "theory" that Whitman was a poseur dates that far back. McCarthy came to see Whitman, and here is what he found in the poet's room: "There was the humble bed, there was the poor washstand, there were the two or three rickety chairs, there was the shelf with the cut loaf of bread.... If ever sincerity and candour shone from the face of a man, these qualities shone from the face of Walt Whitman.

There was an unmistakable dignity about the man despite his poor garb and his utterly careless way of life."[1]

In the late seventies Edward Carpenter paid his first visit to Walt Whitman. He noted the features of individualism in the poet, but understood that the most important thing about him was his astounding capacity for becoming attached to people and loving them. When he visited Whitman for a second time in the mid-eighties, Carpenter once again noticed the contradictions in his character, but nonetheless emphasized the poet's tenderness, his capacity for love.

Carpenter describes a walk he had with the poet, a walk that shows clearly enough how the poet was loved by many ordinary Americans. "The men on the ferry steamer were evidently old friends; and when we landed on the Philadelphia side we were before long quite besieged.... Presently a cheery shout from the top of a dray; and before we had gone many yards farther the driver was down and standing in front of us...." Carpenter went on to say that for the most part Whitman's "words were few. It was the others who spoke, and apparently without reserve."[2]

At about the same time, another English writer, Edmund Gosse, came to see the poet. Camden itself bespoke of nothing pleasant. Gosse was depressed by this grimy little town. The poet's room on the second floor of a small house was poorly furnished (there was only one chair, no carpet, and the wallpaper was in poor condition). But Whitman himself was the incarnation of cleanliness and inner harmony. The poet was a complete stranger to vanity and egotism, emphasized Thomas Donaldson in his book about Walt Whitman.

Even people who had known the poet for a long time did not cease to be impressed by the qualities of his mind and heart. Burroughs was not an ecstatic worshipper of Whitman, like O'Connor or Bucke. Unlike the exalted Bucke, he was not inclined to see in Whitman a mystic in a state of trance, ready to lose himself completely in other people. Yet Burroughs again and again remarked with astonishment how much joy Whitman's presence gave him.

Whitman once wrote that no writer could guard his work from the traces of his own worst traits of character. The

[1] G. W. Allen, *The Solitary Singer*, p. 418.

[2] E. Carpenter, *Days with Walt Whitman*, L., Allen and Unwin, 1921, pp. 8-9.

democratic leanings of a writer were likewise bound to be reflected in his creations. We might do well here to recall Burroughs' judgement: "Walt Whitman never stood apart from or above any human being. The common people — workingmen, the poor, the illiterate, the outcast — saw themselves in him, and he saw himself in them: the attraction was mutual." [1]

The author of *Leaves of Grass* is one of those great poets in whom there is no contradiction between personal qualities and the feelings, sensations, and ideas which they express in their verse. Whitman's individualistic tendencies left their imprint in his book; by the same token, the imprint of love and friendship finds its source in Whitman's genuine love for other human beings.

"I Like the Folks, the Plain ... Folks"

The poet was now advanced in years.

Walt Whitman no longer looked like a youthful dandy or a worker with a powerful neck or a man in the prime of life but prematurely grayed. He was more like a decrepit old farmer. His wide-brimmed hat hung over one eye. His beard was shaggy, and his face wore the traces of hard sufferings, unceasing toil and many worries.

But he was not broken.

After his stroke Whitman lived on for almost twenty years, a semi-invalid, but in possession of his inner harmony and fresh perception of reality. The beauty of the aged poet's spirit and his ability to enjoy life found expression in the tender images of his lyrical poems describing days spent in peaceful meditation.

In 1888, when the poet had only a few years of life ahead of him, he wrote a short poem "Halcyon Days". In it he said:

Not from successful love alone,
Nor wealth, nor honor'd middle age, nor
victories of politics or war;
But as life wanes, and all the turbulent
passions calm,
As gorgeous, vapory, silent hues cover
the evening sky,

[1] John Burroughs, op. cit., Vol. X, p. 71.

As softness, fulness, rest, suffuse
the frame, like fresher, balmier air,
As the days take on a mellower light,
and the apple at last hangs really
finish'd and indolent-ripe on the tree,
Then for the teeming quietest, happiest days of all!
The brooding and blissful halcyon days!

But Whitman, of course, did not renounce the cares of the real world. After his break with Osgood he agreed to have his book published by a Philadelphia firm. Only one of its members, David McKay, showed any real interest in the poet. In the end he became the publisher of Whitman's works.

In 1882 the poet received over a six-month period more than a thousand dollars in royalties for *Leaves of Grass*. But a year later his income from all his books was equal to only a third of that sum. Another two years went by and the receipts from the publisher shrank still further. Of course, Whitman could not exist on the money which McKay was now paying.

Franz Mehring once wrote that with regard to Dickens the English bourgeois society had shown itself to be anything but a stepmother. What it could give him it had offered him in abundance. American society proved fairly benevolent to Mark Twain, although even he at times suffered material hardships.

But for Walt Whitman bourgeois society was a malicious stepmother. More than once was this great national poet forced to resort to charity. Almost all the biographies of Whitman contain lists of persons who gave money to the aged, sick and penniless poet. The Americans were often prodded into such actions by the English. Thus, in 1886, on the initiative of a London newspaper, a New Year's present of eighty pounds was collected for Whitman. Not long before this Rossetti had drawn the attention of the president of the United States to the poet's plight.

From time to time lectures by Whitman, which were really philanthropical in intent, were organized. The specially-invited guests not only bought tickets but also contributed something to help the lecturer. In the mid-eighties several writers (including Mark Twain) pooled their funds in order to

purchase a horse and carriage for the poet, who could now move only with great difficulty; a collection was also made to hire a nurse to take care of Whitman in his illness. Right up till Whitman's death, wealthy America was unable to protect him from the humiliating necessity of accepting private charity. In December 1885 the poet wrote to Burroughs that the Englishmen's "freewill offering" had amounted to over four hundred dollars for the past year. He was still "living on it".[1] As for the royalties that McKay was paying the poet, they were miserable (the previous year he had received less than fifty dollars for *Leaves of Grass* and *Specimen Days*).

In the post-war years Whitman stated several times that in the United States he was mocked just as crudely as before. It was painful for the poet to read Swinton's letter about his difficult negotiations with the editor of a New York newspaper concerning a review of Whitman's latest book.

Whitman's sympathy for simple folk, which he openly expressed, as well as his refusal to submit to the authority of the prim literary men of Boston and New York, widened the gulf between recognized writers and the author of *Leaves of Grass*. Even the gentle Longfellow believed that Whitman could have written something valuable only if he had received a decent education.

On the admission of H. Canby, hostility to *Leaves of Grass* in the poet's homeland did not lessen but grew with the years. Even in the last ten years of his life Whitman continued to be a target for attacks. One of the poet's friends informed him from Boston in the mid-eighties that he was surrounded by a solid wall of enemies; and the English writer Robert Buchanan, who visited the United States at this time, came to the conclusion that Whitman was ignored in his homeland.

The poet had long dreamed of his own small house where he could live out the rest of his days without worrying about paying rent or finding himself out in the street. This dream he inherited from Louisa Whitman. One of her most touching letters to her son, written not long before her death, was about owning a house. She wrote that when people grow old, they ought to have a home of their own. A bit later she again expressed the hope that her beloved son would get "the

[1] W. Whitman, *The Correspondence*, Vol. III, p. 414.

cheapest house that you could build"[1] and that they would move into it together.

Only in the eighties was the poet able to satisfy his longing for a little house of his own. At this time George moved to a small farm not far from Camden and was extremely vexed when his brother refused to accompany him. Walt Whitman decided to buy a small wooden house in Camden, partly with his royalties for the bumper year of 1882, and partly on credit.

The house on Mickle Street needed repair and had no stove. Nor was there any furniture. Furthermore the house stood only one block away from the railroad tracks. Trains rumbled past day and night and the smoke from the locomotives did nothing to cheer the inhabitants of the gloomy Mickle Street. But Whitman was happy.

Gradually the poet acquired a stove, boxes (which served as table and chairs) and some kitchen utensils. George's wife gave him his mother's bed.

I have twice visited Whitman's house on Mickle Street. It was not then an official museum, but the lodgers were kind enough to show me the small room on the upper floor in which Whitman spent the last years of his life.

No, this Mickle Street house did not look like the dwelling of a writer who was becoming world-famous. It might have been the home of a retired railway employee (the proximity of the railroad immediately made itself felt) or a ferryman or even an unskilled laborer.

The people who showed the few visitors the poet's final refuge did not speak of poetry or literature. They remembered the whims of the women who prepared Whitman's meals and cleaned up his room, and they also exhibited the huge zinc basin which stood under the bed — the poet's bathtub.

His desire to have his own place and be independent of his relatives and friends was partly induced by the fear that the first stroke might be followed by others. But as long as Whitman could control his legs, he tried to get out as much as possible.

One of his friends, who often visited the poet in Camden, recalled that he would sit on a chair by some vegetable stall, chattering with the Italian owner and shaking hands with

[1] W. Whitman, *The Correspondence*, Vol. II, p. 208.

street-car drivers. Once Whitman took his friend to a small tavern and introduced him to some poorly dressed people.

"I like the folks, the plain, ignorant, unpretentious folks; and the youngsters that come and slide on my cellar door do not disturb me a bit,"[1] Whitman once said. One of the children who loved the old poet and "gathered around the marble steps where he came to sit in the evening"[2] was Ella Reeve Bloor. In her autobiography she speaks of these evenings and of trips on the river ferry from Camden to Philadelphia. "That was the height of happiness," she writes, "watching the people with him, watching the water."[3]

About the Heartlessness of the Post-War Years

In the poem "L. of G.'s Purport" Whitman said: "I end it here in sickness, poverty, and old age." But the poet also mentioned that he "never even for one brief hour" abandoned his "task". The many years that Whitman spent as a half-paralyzed pauper were not simply spent in sad meditation. He wrote many new poems and prose works. There were times when the poet's physical condition significantly improved.

Whitman's boundless capacity for love enabled him to find genuine comradeship even in his last years.

One place where he found it was in the Stafford family. In the mid-seventies, the poet became friendly with the young apprentice Harry Stafford who worked in a printshop where one edition of *Leaves of Grass* was printed. Harry introduced Whitman to his parents, who were ordinary farming folk, kind and hospitable.

The Staffords gladly invited Whitman to visit their farm, and he spent many happy hours in their company. Harry's father, his wife and their numerous children lived in an old house surrounded by trees and lilac bushes. On the Staffords' farm the poet experienced the joy of partial recovery. Each day he felt that he could walk just a little bit farther than the day before, that he was gaining strength and his legs were easier to control.

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[1] R. L. Stevenson, *The Essay on Walt Whitman*, N. Y., Roycroft, 1900, pp. 15-16.

[2] E. Bloor, *We Are Many*, p. 21.

[3] Ibid. p. 22.

Edwin Haviland Miller, the editor of Whitman's collected letters, correctly remarked in his introduction to the third volume that the poet always sought refuge "among people who resembled his parents and his brothers and sisters".[1] The Staffords were just such people.

Some of the most enchanting entries in Whitman's diary, which were later included in *Specimen Days*, describe these days on the Staffords' farm. It was probably here that the poet recorded, for instance, the following picture of "the quiet splendor" of summer: "We had a heavy shower, with brief thunder and lightning, in the middle of the day; and since, overhead, one of those not uncommon yet indescribable skies (in quality, not details or forms) of limpid blue, with rolling silver-fringed clouds, and a pure-dazzling sun. For underlay, trees in fulness of tender foliage — liquid, reedy, long-drawn notes of birds — based by the fretful mewing of a querulous cat-bird, and the pleasant chippering-shriek of two kingfishers. I have been watching the latter the last half hour, on their regular evening frolic over and in the stream; evidently a spree of the liveliest kind. They pursue each other, whirling and wheeling around, with many a jocund downward dip, splashing the spray in jets of diamonds — and then off they swoop, with slanting wings and graceful flight, sometimes so near me I can plainly see their dark-gray feather-bodies and milk-white necks."

His notes in prose are no less poetical than his verses. Whitman's power of observation is truly amazing.

The poet made the following entry about a week later. Once again he is sitting and waiting for the sunset. Once again he is aware of the loveliness of his homeland, feels joy in the sunshine and a slight sadness over his old age: "... the grass and trees looking their best — the clare-obscure of different greens, shadows, half-shadows, and the dappling glimpses of the water, through recesses — the wild flageolet-note of a quail near by — the just-heard fretting of some hylas down there in the pond — crows cawing in the distance — a drove of young hogs rooting in soft ground near the oak under which I sit — some come sniffing near me, and then scamper away, with grunts. And still the clear notes of the quail — the quiver of leaf-shadows over the paper as I write — the sky aloft, with

[1] W. Whitman, *The Correspondence*, Vol. III, p. 3.

white clouds, and the sun well declining to the west — the swift darting of many sand-swallows coming and going, their holes in a neighboring marl-bank — the odor of the cedar and oak, so palpable, as evening approaches — perfume, color, the bronze-and-gold of nearly ripen'd wheat — clover-fields, with honey-scent — the well-up maize, with long and rusting leaves — the great patches of thriving potatoes, dusky green, fleck'd all over with white blossoms — the old, warty, venerable oak above me — and ever, mix'd with the dual notes of the quail, the soughing of the wind through some near-by pines."

Further on the poet recalls "a delicious song-epilogue" which pours "from some bushy recess off there in the swamp" and the swallows circling "in the last rays of sunset".

The entry which Whitman made about two months later, not only has new and fresh observations of bird-life; it also contains the casually thrown-out remark: "I rode through a piece of woods for a hundred rods the other evening...."

The poet was gaining strength.

In practically all his poems Whitman describes nature in one way or another. In the very first works which flowed into the mighty ocean of *Leaves of Grass* he depicts nature as joyful and at times stormy, but always close to man and accessible to his understanding. But in the poems which Whitman wrote in the second half of his life nature is largely serene and limpid. Once again nature had become the source of joy it had been when he wrote: "Press close, bare-bosom'd night", but the poet is more restrained. His imagery is closer to everyday reality.

This can be felt even in his verses about spring. Here are some lines from the poem "Warble for Lilac-Time" (1870) which was written after the Civil War:

Warble me now for joy of lilac-time, (returning in
reminiscence,)
Sort me O tongue and lips for Nature's sake,
souvenirs of earliest summer,
Gather the welcome signs, (as children with pebbles
or stringing shells,)
Put in April and May, the hylas croaking in the
ponds, the elastic air,
Bees, butterflies, the sparrow with its simple
notes....

There is striking accuracy in the depiction of the robin hopping "bright-eyed, brown breasted" and the wood-violets, "the little delicate pale blossoms called innocence".

These verses, replete with a bright spring-time feeling, have their own music which is not easy to analyze, but which begins to take hold of us when we re-read the poem.

"By Broad Potomac's Shore" (1876) was probably written while the poet was staying on the Staffords' farm. The poet seems to shake off his load of sickness and suffering. His "old heart" is "so gay" once more and with his whole being he awaits the return of spring:

Again the freshness and the odors, again Virginia's
summer sky, pellucid blue and silver,
Again the forenoon purple of the hills,
Again the deathless grass, so noiseless soft and green,
Again the blood-red roses blooming.

Whitman knew that the book of his life would not remain open much longer, that death was not far off, but he wanted the spirit of youth to live on in his poetry. He would not have his verses smell of decay. Addressing nature, he exclaims:

Perfume this book of mine O blood-red roses!
Lave subtly with your waters every line Potomac!
Give me of you O spring, before I close, to put
between its pages!
O forenoon purple of the hills, before I close, of you!
O deathless grass, of you!

Still, happy as he was face to face with serene nature, Whitman never attempted to abandon the turbulent problems of social reality for the world of fields and woods. These problems occupied a large place in his conversations with his friends. As before, the hearts of many progressive people were drawn to the poet.

One such person was Richard Hinton, an Englishman who had come to America as a young man. Hinton was an ardent abolitionist who fought together with John Brown against the slave owners and only by chance avoided the latter's fate. During the Civil War Hinton had served in the northern army. He had a high opinion of Whitman's poetry and felt a personal sympathy for him. Several times Hinton published articles in the American press defending the poet against his attackers.

The poet's namesake Sarah Helen Whitman became a great admirer of *Leaves of Grass*. She had once been engaged to Edgar Allan Poe and wrote poetry herself. "The great, the good Camerado! The lover of men"[1] — these were the words she used to describe Whitman.

Another woman writer, Anne Botta, also understood the worth of Whitman's art. It was at her house that Poe first publicly read his poem "The Raven". In her *Handbook of Universal Literature* Botta comments: "Walt Whitman ... writes with great force, originality, and sympathy with all forms of struggle and suffering, but with utter contempt for conventionalities and for the acknowledged limits of true art."[2]

Whitman drew even closer to John Swinton. When he fell ill once, the poet asked Swinton to visit him. Whitman joyfully informed O'Connor that Swinton spoke very kindly of *Leaves of Grass*. Swinton more than once commented favorably on Whitman's work in the press. Incidentally, he authored one of the first articles about *Leaves of Grass* to appear in the Russian press.

In 1880 John Swinton made the personal acquaintance of Karl Marx. In the *New York Sun* he called Marx "one of the most remarkable men of the day". Marx was a man who for forty years had played "an inscrutable but puissant part in the revolutionary politics". His mind, wrote Swinton, is "strong, broad, elevated", and his dialogue is "so free, so sweeping, so creative, so incisive, so genuine".[3] Since Whitman always followed the New York press closely, it is quite possible that he read his friend's article.

The Camden lawyer Thomas Harned was also one of Whitman's friends and the poet often visited him.

But the person who was closest of all to Whitman in the last years of his life was Harned's relative Horace Traubel.

Traubel was fifteen years old when he began to chat occasionally with the white-beared old poet on the streets of Camden. Later the young bank clerk, a convinced socialist who in secret wrote poetry similar to Whitman's, became wholeheartedly devoted to the poet.

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[1] W. Whitman, *The Correspondence*, Vol. II, p. 64.
[2] Ibid., p. 121.
[3] *Mainstream*, 1963, May, p. 17

For several years before the poet's death Traubel visited him almost every day. He gladly helped Whitman to prepare his last collections of poetry for print and to sort out his papers; he carried out every possible kind of errand when the "good gray poet" had already grown very weak. It was to Traubel that Whitman entrusted many of his manuscripts before he died. This Camden clerk published a great deal of previously unknown material written by Whitman.

But it is not only for this that American literature is indebted to Horace Traubel. For many, many months he kept a remarkably detailed record of his conversations with Whitman. During Traubel's lifetime three volumes of these notes entitled *With Walt Whitman in Camden* were published. They contain exceedingly valuable material concerning the poet's life and views.

It was a source of great unhappiness to Whitman's executor that he was unable to print most of the notes he had taken. Only many years after his death, in 1953, was one more volume published. Even then, however, a substantial part of the material left by Traubel about Whitman remained unpublished. In the sixties a fifth volume of Traubel's notes appeared.

William E. Walling, the author of the book *Whitman and Traubel*, containing a great deal of information about both of these writers calls Traubel's *With Walt Whitman in Camden* "probably the most remarkable and valuable human document since Boswell's Johnson" [1] and predicts that this series of books may finally make up eight volumes.

Horace Traubel was in some ways a link between Whitman and that part of American twentieth-century literature which was inspired, to a greater or lesser degree, by socialist ideas. In the second decade of the century, and up to his death, Traubel wrote for the journals the *Masses* and the *Liberator*.

Walling quotes in his book the following statement about Traubel made by Eugene Debs: "He not only brings the Old Prophet of Democracy (Walt Whitman.— *M. M.*) up to date but he traverses untrodden fields and explores new realms in quest of the truth." [2]

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[1] W. E. Walling. *Whitman and Traubel*. Foreword.
[2] Ibid.

Not long before his death Traubel published Whitman's call to American writers to discard the principle of art for art's sake. There can be no doubt that these words also expressed the younger man's own credo.

At the end of his life Whitman had some grounds to call himself a socialist (although he did this with certain reservations). The evolution of the poet's views was dictated above all by the almost uninterrupted growth of the class struggle in the United States after the Civil War, a struggle in which the workers and farmers fought against the domination of money. Moreover, he was certainly influenced by those of his friends who had already drawn on the treasure-trove of Marx's thought.

The poet who in *Democratic Vistas* had made so many bold judgements about the position and the tasks of literature and art in post-war America, often returned to these problems in other publicistic works. He seemed to be trying to verify the truth of his own assessments and forecasts.

When he issued a two-volume edition of verse and prose for the hundredth anniversary of the Declaration of Independence, Whitman unexpectedly characterized one of the volumes, containing "the chants of *Leaves of Grass*" as radiating "Physiology alone", while the second volume, which was mostly a collection of his post-war work, showed "the Pathology". How are we to understand this? Like many other Whitman students, we could proffer the simple solution that the second volume contained writings produced at sad periods of the poet's life, during the years of his own illness and his mother's death. But then *Democratic Vistas*, one of the manifestations of "Pathology", was written at a time when Whitman's mother was still alive and he considered himself a comparatively healthy man.

It is more likely that the poet saw something "pathological" in the second volume because the works collected in this book reflected "the morbid facts of American politics and society", which were so typical of the life in his country after the conclusion of the Civil War.

Whitman's essay "Poetry To-day in America—Shakspere—the Future", published at the very beginning of the eighties, is essentially a continuation of *Democratic Vistas*. Once more Whitman considers the spiritual life of his homeland and once again, more than ten years after *Democratic Vistas*, he

expresses his dissatisfaction with American poetry and cultural life in general. He says: "... I am clear that until the United States have just such definite and native expressers in the highest artistic fields, their mere political, geographical, wealth-forming, and even intellectual eminence ... will constitute but a more and more expanded and well-appointed body, and perhaps brain, with little or no soul."

Whitman openly mocks the rank-and-file poets of the "gilded age" whose verses dominated the popular press and who were praised by the critics. "The fatal defects our American singers labor under are subordination of spirit, an absence of the concrete and of real patriotism, and in excess that modern æsthetic contagion a queer friend of mine calls the *beauty disease.*"

Whitman's sarcasm grows more scathing: "... the accepted notion of a poet would appear to be a sort of male odalisque, singing or piano-playing a kind of spiced ideas, second-hand reminiscences, or toying late hours at entertainments, in rooms stifling with fashionable scent. I think I haven't seen a new-publish'd, healthy, bracing, simple lyric in ten years. Not long ago, there were verses in each of three fresh monthlies, from leading authors, and in every one the whole central *motif* (perfectly serious) was the melancholiness of a marriageable young woman who didn't get a rich husband, but a poor one!"

The essay contains some judgements on the role of poetry in the life of society with which it is difficult to agree. But it is significant that Whitman sees the degradation of American poetry as the fatal result of the moral decline of society.

I should also note that Whitman sees the writer's duty not in the glorification of American reality as it exists, but in the struggle with the evil dominating the country. In this sense not only Mark Twain but also the author of *Leaves of Grass* cleared the way for American critical realism in the twentieth century.

Another ten years later, shortly before his death, the poet posed the same questions and gave more or less the same answers. In the articles "An Old Man's Rejoinder" and "American National Literature" Whitman once again comes to the conclusion that the latest poetry produced in his homeland is not up to the mark.

In a paper about Elias Hicks, one of the most radical preachers that the poet had ever heard, Whitman speaks extremely sharply of the weakness of the moral sense in the

United States. In his opinion, the devaluation of moral virtues had had an adverse effect on the state of literature.

As though contradicting those twentieth century Whitman "specialists" who were to claim that *Leaves of Grass* had almost nothing in common with the real life of the United States and reflected only the "sick soul" of the author, the poet declared that *Leaves of Grass* expressed more than just his own feelings. In "An Old Man's Rejoinder" Whitman declares: "No great poem or other literary or artistic work of any scope, old or new, can be essentially consider'd without weighing first the age, politics (or want of politics) and aim, visible forms, unseen soul, and current times, out of the midst of which it rises.... So I have conceiv'd and launch'd, and work'd for years at, my 'Leaves of Grass'—personal emanations only at best, but with specialty of emergence and background—the ripening of the nineteenth century, the thought and fact and radiation of individuality, of America, the Secession war...."

Whitman's sharp (and for the most part just) criticism of American poetry of the last decades of the nineteenth century and of the moral principles of bourgeois society in the United States did not lead him to nihilistic conclusions. He did not abandon his belief that in the end the American people would create a great art and great spiritual culture and a society based on noble moral principles. "In the main I myself look, and have from the first look'd, to the bulky democratic *torso* of the United States even for esthetic and moral attributes of serious account...," he wrote in "An Old Man's Rejoinder".

At the end of his life Whitman voiced more sharply than ever his hostility to the literary norms and authorities in the United States, and also to the "public" by which he meant the "genteel" reading public. He declared once: "While I stand in reverence before the fact of Humanity, the People, I will confess, in writing my L of G, the least consideration out of all that has had to do with it has been the consideration of 'the public'—at any rate as it now exists. Strange as it may sound for a democrat to say so. I am clear that no free and original and lofty-soaring poem, or one ambitious of these achievements, can possibly be fulfill'd by any writer who has largely in his thought *the public*—or the question, What will establish'd literature—What will the current authorities say about it? As far as I have sought any, not the best laid out garden or parterre has been my model—but Nature has been. I know

that in a sense the garden is nature too, but I had to choose — I could not give both. Besides the gardens are well represented in poetry; while Nature (in letter and in spirit, in the divine essence,) little if at all."

We have seen that in assessing the state of poetry and art in the United States, the poet invariably criticized the general nature of American bourgeois life. Thus in "An Old Man's Rejoinder" Whitman remarked sarcastically about the critic Edmund Stedman: "Then E. C. Stedman finds (or found) mark'd fault with me because while celebrating the common people *en masse*, I do not allow enough heroism and moral merit and good intentions to the choicer classes, the college-bred, the *état-major*." Let Stedman be right about this. But, continued Whitman, "if America is only for the rule and fashion and small typicality of other lands (the rule of the *état-major*) it is not the land I take it for, and should to-day feel that my literary aim and theory had been blanks and misdirections."

The poet spoke of the vices of contemporary reality in even more detail (and with the same candid condemnation) in a series of articles dealing directly with problems of social life.

When in the late seventies, for the first time since the Civil War, there was a mass strike movement in the United States, Whitman responded to it immediately.

One might expect that the poet would have been totally preoccupied with his own illness after 1873; in fact he carefully followed the development of the struggle between labor and capital during this period.

In his notes for the lecture (proposed, but never delivered) "The Tramp and Strike Questions" the poet commented on the sudden exacerbation of the social struggle in the United States. He refused to regard the events of the late seventies as simply the result of misunderstandings, accidental mistakes or evil actions of isolated individuals. He was aware that the social struggle had roots in social contradictions, the contradictions between the propertied and the under-privileged. He said: "Beneath the whole political world ... is not the abstract question of democracy, but of social and economic organization, the treatment of working-people by employers, and all that goes along with it...." Whitman concluded with this bold declaration: "If the United States ... are also to grow vast crops

of poor, desperate, dissatisfied ... populations ... then our republican experiment ... is at heart an unhealthy failure."

In a note entitled "Who Gets the Plunder?" the poet shows that the interests of the ruling class in the United States have nothing in common with the interests of the masses. He is an enemy of "a few score select persons—who, by favors of Congress, State legislatures, the banks, and other special advantages, are forming a vulgar aristocracy...".

Like Mark Twain, the poet was coming to the painful realization that the republican system of government in the context of bourgeois democracy was not all that superior to the monarchical system. The American "vulgar aristocracy" was "full as bad as anything in the British or European castes, of blood, or the dynasties there of the past".

Whitman felt that the United States was no longer the country it had been during the Civil War. In "Specimen Days" he contrasts the greed and heartlessness of the post-war years to the greatness of spirit which Americans had demonstrated when they were faced with an exalted task.

"Many Things We Acquiesce in Now Would Be Destroyed"

Stormy as the social conflicts may have been in the seventies, the events of the second half of the following decade proved to be still more dramatic. In 1886 the first May Day demonstration in the world took place in Chicago. In the same year workers were shot and several leaders of the American proletariat were imprisoned. All this resulted in an unprecedented upsurge of class consciousness in the working masses.

Early in 1886 Engels wrote: "The tendency of the Capitalist system towards the ultimate splitting-up of society into two classes, a few millionaires on the one hand, and a great mass of mere wage-workers on the other, this tendency ... works nowhere with greater force than in America; and the result has been the production of a class of native American wage-workers, ... who feel all the more acutely their present condemnation to life-long wage-toil...." [1]

[1] K. Marx and F. Engels, *On Britain*, Moscow, 1962, p. 7.

Bourgeois literary scholars often deny that Whitman's views on society underwent any important evolution. However, the notes taken by Traubel in the late eighties show that towards the end of his life the poet's outlook changed profoundly as compared to the years before the Civil War or the first post-war years. These notes include a frank confession by Whitman that he now had a far better understanding of class relationships. During his youth, the poet told Traubel, the working class question had not been so important as nowadays, when it was beginning to play a vital role. And as Whitman saw it, the time would come when those who had obtained their wealth at the expense of the poor would be brought to account.

The image created by Traubel's five volumes of *With Walt Whitman in Camden* published so far is that of an old man who despite his age was capable of thinking clearly and absorbing new ideas.

Whitman himself admitted that in personal conversation he allowed himself to speak more frankly than in print. Thus he once told Traubel that if "the truth were told, if we dared say so, many things we acquiesce in now would be destroyed...".[1]

In the poet's words, the trouble with Americans was their "devil of a craze for money — money in everything for every occasion — by hook or by crook, money: and, on top of that, show, show: crowning all that, brilliancy, smartness unsurpassed, repartee, social wish-wash, very misleading, very superficial...".[2]

The cynical, legalized murder of the leaders of the working masses in the eighties made clear to Whitman the nature of "legality" in the United States. The existing laws, he said sarcastically, proceed from the supposition that the people "have nothing to do but study the comforts and purses of governments, monarchs, legislatures: the pleasure of lords, ladies, nabobs. What is legality anyway? — puzzle — pretense, snare."[3]

At the end of his life the poet was even more strongly attracted to the workers.

In his conversations with Traubel Whitman once expressed

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[1] H. Traubel, *With Walt Whitman in Camden*, 1953, p. 471.
[2] H. Traubel, *With Walt Whitman in Camden*, 1915, p. 187.
[3] Ibid., pp. 190-91.

himself as follows: "I resolved at the start to diagnose, recognize, state, the care of the mechanics, laborers, artisans, of America ... give them a voice in literature...."[1]

The poet often pondered how the working people could free themselves of their shackles. "The working class is slow to learn," he sadly remarked. "They are cheated, swindled, robbed ... yet go on year after year putting their robbers back in Congress, in the legislatures...."[2]

Whitman, of course, was far from Marxism, but as a democrat he was wholly on the side of the working men and women of America.

The poet sometimes called himself a socialist ("... I find I'm a good deal more of a socialist than I thought I was..." [3]). He also said that socialism looked like the people's only hope.

Casting aside his bourgeois illusions and faith in American democracy was a painful process. Nonetheless Whitman came to acknowledge: "We have built up things on corrupt foundations." And he continued courageously: "What are we going to do about it? Keep on building higher and higher with the foundations wrong? Or get our foundations right before we go any farther?" And he also said: "I want to see the whole thing challenged: I want us to start where we should: not with property but with man."[4]

Whitman prophetically remarked that the really fundamental problems of American life were still awaiting a solution. Further generations would have to tackle them. These "life and death challenges" would line the Americans up fiercely on this side or that. Finally the people would wake up. The "crowd" would understand "where its real interests lie and put in an irrefusable demand for them".[5]

"Thanks in Old Age ... Joyful Thanks!"

In the poem "Good-Bye My Fancy!", written in 1891, Whitman takes his farewell of life and of his own poetry. At the

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[1] H. Traubel, *With Walt Whitman in Camden*, 1915, pp. 142-43.
[2] Ibid. p. 115.
[3] Ibid., p. 4.
[4] W. Whitman, *Leaves of Grass* (1855-71). L., N. Y., Dent, Dutton, 1935, p. VII.
[5] H. Traubel, *With Walt Whitman in Camden*, 1915, p. 307.

same time he once again asserts the glory of existence. The poet's heart is full of faith in life and in art.

Good-bye my Fancy!
Farewell dear mate, dear love!
I'm going away, I know not where....

The poem "Thanks in Old Age" (1888), written somewhat earlier, begins with these lines, which express Whitman's characteristic love of life:

Thanks in old age — thanks ere I go,
For health, the midday sun, the impalpable air — for life,
mere life,
For precious ever-lingering memories, (of you my
mother dear — you father — you,
brothers, sisters, friends,)
For all my days — not those of peace alone — the days of
war the same,
For gentle words, caresses, gifts from foreign lands,
For shelter, wine and meat — for sweet appreciation....

How typical that even in his very last years and months the poet did not withdraw into the private world of his own ego. Whitman was as keenly aware as before of his close relationship with everything going on in the world and especially with those who fought for freedom.

The poet thanks life not only for the earthly joys it has given him, "for shelter, wine and meat". He offers his thanks, an old man's thanks, "joyful thanks"

For beings, groups, love, deeds, words, books — for
colors, forms,
For all the brave strong men — devoted, hardy men — who've
forward sprung in freedom's help,
all years, all lands,
For braver, stronger, more devoted men — (a special
laurel ere I go, to life's war's
chosen ones,
The cannoneers of song and thought — the great artille-
rists — the foremost leaders,
captains of the soul:)....

A number of testimonies have been left describing Whitman at the end of his days. Burroughs, for instance, saw Whitman at a time when the poet's life hung by a thread and said that he had never seen his face so beautiful. "There was no breaking-down of the features, or the least sign of decrepitude, such as we usually note in old men." [1]

The poet's appearance was so attractive, so human that some of the best painters and sculptors were eager to try to capture it.

Whitman was drawn by Anne Gilchrist's son Herbert, and a poet's bust was sculpted by Sidney Morse. A portrait of Whitman by John Alexander was purchased by the New York Metropolitan Museum. But the greatest portrait of the poet was painted by the American master of the realistic portrait, Thomas Eakins. (The American sculptor Augustus Saint-Gaudens intended to sculpt Whitman, but the old man died before he could start work.)

Eakins saw Whitman as a man after his own heart. Like Whitman, this artist, who sought to portray the human character in all its psychological depth and complexity, had to battle for his right to be a realist. Several of his pictures were met with howls of indignation and mockery.

In the Eakins portrait (dated 1887), Whitman is depicted exactly as he was. The poet is old, very old and corpulent. At first glance he appears to be a completely shattered man. There is nothing picturesque about Whitman. He seems to be a typical simple old man who has suffered much. But the portrait reveals the immense spiritual power this remarkable man possessed even in his old age.

Walt Whitman left life fully conscious, without fear or trepidation. He died on March 26, 1892. One of the poet's friends recalled that the end came when twilight had already fallen and it was gently raining. Whitman's right hand lay in the hand of his dearest comrade, Horace Traubel.

After a post-mortem examination, one of the doctors declared it was a miracle that the poet had continued to live and breathe for so long. Only Walt Whitman's indomitable will could account for it, he said.

The article which appeared in the *New York Times* two days after the poet's death was a quintessential expression of the

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[1] J. Burroughs, op. cit., Vol. X, p. 60.

opinions held by many of his bourgeois contemporaries. The article stated that the author of *Leaves of Grass* "concerned himself to be especially the poetical spokesman of the b'hoy...", but had only attained "conscious vulgarity" of language; finally, that "Whitman has not written a single poem that can be called a perfect specimen or a very good specimen of the art of poetry".[1]

Had the poet read this article he would probably have seen it as yet one more proof that his work really was, as he loved to express it, a battle weapon.

[1] *Daily Worker*, August 25, 1954.

AND IN CONCLUSION...

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Whitman Abroad

Many times during Whitman's lifetime American literary men remarked with astonishment, or with annoyance (recall Taylor's sarcastic verses) that *Leaves of Grass* was liked far better abroad than it was in the poet's homeland.

I have already spoken about the interest evinced for Whitman's work by certain English poets and critics from late sixties onwards.

In a conversation with Traubel towards the end of his life the poet spoke with deep emotion of the kindly attitude of the English.

As early as 1868 Ferdinand Freiligrath introduced Whitman's work to the German reading public by printing an article on the American poet in a German newspaper. It was one of the first critical works on Whitman to appear in the continental press.

There is some evidence (the accuracy of which is, however, disputed) that Karl Marx became acquainted with Whitman's work at about this time. In his book about the life and work of Marx, first published in English in 1910, John Spargo affirms that when Marx heard of the "Good Gray Poet" he immediately became interested. According to Spargo, he would even quote sections from "Song of Myself" and the poem "Pioneers".

In the late eighties Whitman gave a public speech on Lincoln—in New York; those in attendance included Mark Twain, the sculptor Augustus Saint-Gaudens, James Lowell and José Marti. The poet's speech and verses impressed Marti deeply. He said that it was the poetry of unity and faith, solemn

and serene poetry, arising like the sun from beyond the sea, lighting up the clouds and setting the crests of the waves on fire.

The Cuban revolutionary writer José Marti was the first Latin American to respond to the poet's verse as a call for freedom. Marti's article on Whitman's work first appeared in an Argentinian newspaper and was later reprinted by other periodicals in Latin America.

Whitman's verse had an obvious influence on a number of European and South American poets. They include Emile Verhaeren. This was noted by Lunacharsky in his article on Whitman, where he mentions Verhaeren and Whitman in the same breath.

Pablo Neruda, who glorified the great American in his poetry, wrote proudly that Whitman's memory was cherished more deeply in Latin America than in his homeland. Walt Whitman, he continued, was a great champion of equality, and this gave him the right to enter any poor home in America and sit down at the table without introduction.

Since the end of last century the verses of the American poet have also found grateful readers in France and a number of other countries.

W. Walling wrote that Whitman's poetry and Whitman's democracy are inseparable.

Today, Whitman's poetry, free and sweeping in its boundless humanism, wealth of fantasy, democratic leanings and revolutionary ardor, brings joy and aesthetic pleasure to millions of people throughout the world arousing in them noble feelings and thoughts.

It was no accident that in the speech which Paul Eluard meant to make at the Peace Congress in New York (the American authorities did not allow the French poet to enter the United States) he recalled Whitman's prophetic words about the triumph of freedom and equality to come.

The Australian Katharine Susannah Prichard reflected the views of many of her fellow-countrymen when she spoke warmly of the author of *Leaves of Grass*. Whitman is very highly regarded in many socialist countries and in France, Japan and Mexico.

One of the most attractive aspects of *Leaves of Grass*, which has made it dear to the working people of all lands, is the book's passionate, sincere internationalism.

In a foreword to a foreign edition of his poetry Whitman wrote that the key to his poetry was to be found in the call for goodwill between the simple people of all nations. In a conversation with Traubel he remarked that "no man is a democrat, a true democrat, who forgets that he is interested in the welfare of the race.... He may talk of democracy, of the people, but it's all a lie—all false...." [1]

Let us recall that hymn to the brotherhood of all peoples, "Salut au Monde!" Whitman rejects no nation, cuts himself off from no one, gives no one preference. The unity of all nations, of people white, black, brown in the color of their skin is the message of the poet's noble words: "Salut au Monde!"

In this poem, as also in "Song of Myself", "Song of the Broad-Axe" and many other of his poems, Whitman addresses not only the working people of the United States but the whole of humanity.

The poem "This Moment Yearning and Thoughtful" expresses his sympathy for people in other lands who are united in their thirst for brotherhood:

This moment yearning and thoughtful sitting alone,
It seems to me there are other men in other lands
yearning and thoughtful,
It seems to me I can look over and behold them in
Germany, Italy, France, Spain,
Or far, far away, in China, or in Russia or Japan,
talking other dialects,
And it seems to me if I could know those men I should
become attached to them as I do to men in my
own lands,
O I know we should be brethren and lovers,
I know I should be happy with them.

I have mentioned more than once Whitman's respect for the heroic deeds of the revolutionary French people. The American poet's interest in Russia is not too well known, nor are the facts of how his work came to appear before Russian readers. I have touched on this subject above. The following pages give a more exhaustive view of Whitman's translations and studies in Russia.

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[1] H. Traubel, *With Walt Whitman in Camden*, 1915, p. 55.

"You Russians and We Americans!"

Some time ago one American literary critic remarked with astonishment that the name of Walt Whitman had been known in Russia for over a hundred years.

A short comment on *Leaves of Grass* appeared in *Otechestvenniye Zapiski (Notes of the Fatherland)* as early as 1861.

In this article *Leaves of Grass* was called ... a novel. The reviewer who informed his readers that the English journals were up in arms against the American novel *Leaves of Grass,* had not, of course, read any Whitman, but he was convinced that "the book must have some virtues, if only of presentation, since it has not been passed by in silence...".[1]

Russian Whitman studies were begun in earnest by Turgenev, who was deeply impressed by a small book of Whitman's verse which fell into his hands in the early seventies of the last century. In a letter to P. Annenkov Turgenev mentions his intention to publish "several translations of lyrical verses by the amazing American poet Walt Whitman (have you heard of him?) with a short foreword. It is impossible to imagine anything more astounding."[2] There is now no doubt that Turgenev had in mind *his own* translations.

Among the Turgenev manuscripts preserved in a Paris library there is a translation of Whitman's poem "Beat! Beat! Drums!"

This is no place to discuss the virtues and shortcomings of Turgenev's translation. The very fact of its existence is an exciting new proof of the immense impression which *Leaves of Grass* made on the Russian novelist.

Let us now examine the attitude to the Russians displayed by this poet who dreamed of seeing his verses published in Russian translation.

We know that Whitman took a deep and sympathetic interest in Russia because (according to the authoritative testimony of Furness) he "spent a great deal of time investigating Russia. He made extensive notations of his readings in the field of Russian

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[1] *Otechestvenniye zapiski,* Vol. CXXXIV, January, 1861, "Obzor inostrannoi literatury" (Review of Foreign Literature), p. 61 (in Russian).

[2] I. S. Turgenev, *Collected Works and Letters,* Vol. 10, Nauka Publishers, 1965, p. 18 (in Russian).

history, economics, and literature."[1] Furness also quotes a conversation with Whitman in which the latter described Russia as a great giant growing, trying to develop.

The poet's notes on Russia are kept in the Library of Congress. In them Whitman describes geographical details and comments on Russian society and manners.

It is also interesting that all his life Whitman kept a newspaper clipping from the fifties referring to Russian literature. Later he expressed a friendly opinion of Turgenev and Tolstoy.

Whitman's "Letter to a Russian", known to millions in Russia, was written when a certain Irishman by the name of John Lee, who lived in Dresden, made plans to publish *Leaves of Grass* in Russian. Thomas Rolleston, who translated *Leaves of Grass* into German, also played no small part in this venture. The edition, however, never materialized.

Whitman's correspondence with Lee and Rolleston in the eighties, which was published after the Second World War, unfolds the history of his message to Russia.

In a letter written to Whitman from Dresden on November 28, 1881, Rolleston informed the poet of his work on the German translation of *Leaves of Grass* and added: "I think a *Russian* translation is also probable.... A friend and countryman of mine named Lee, living here, is an ardent Russian scholar and intimate with many men of that nation living here and in Servia, etc. They are mostly exiles, which means, speaking generally, men of unusual ability and thoughtfulness. I have made Lee acquainted with the L. of G., which he appreciates.... And I think ... that he would be likely to undertake a Russian translation, and that he could get the best possible help for it.... The book would doubtless be prohibited by Government but that would not hinder its spread much, rather the contrary."[2]

John Lee was so attracted by Rolleston's proposal that he wrote a letter to Whitman the same day stating in it that he agreed with the poet's sentiments and admired his works. Lee continued: "I am an ardent student of the Russian Language, and greatly interested in the huge country and its strange

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[1] *Whitman's Workshop*, p. 161.

[2] Whitman and Rolleston, *A Correspondence*, Edited by H. Frenz. Bloomington, Ind., Indiana University Press, 1951, p. 45.

people and history. Your book is the book for them. Will you allow me to translate the 'Leaves of Grass' into Russian? It will do good, of that I am perfectly sure. I know the Russian character, and say again that the 'Leaves of Grass' is the book for them." [1]

Walt Whitman was hopeful that within a short time his poetry would really become known to the Russian reader; and almost immediately (December 20, 1881) he wrote an introduction to the future Russian edition of *Leaves of Grass.*

This introduction, which took the form of a letter to the translator, begins with these words:

"Dear Sir, Your letter asking definite endorsement to a translation of my *Leaves of Grass* into Russian is just received, and I hasten to answer it. Most warmly and willingly I consent to the translation, and waft a prayerful *God speed* to the enterprise." [2]

The introduction follows, beginning with the words, "You Russians and we Americans!"

Whitman knew, of course, that Lee was not Russian, and in a postscript to the letter he wrote, "You see I have addressed you as Russian — let it stand so — go on with your translation...".[3]

This letter to the Russians is one of Whitman's most memorable publicistic works, expressing with great power the poet's warm feelings towards the people of Russia.

Beginning with the remark that Russia and America are distant and unlike at first glance, Whitman goes on to emphasize that "in certain features" the two countries resemble each other. A great future awaits both countries. They "have their historic and divine mission ... the grand expanse of territorial limits and boundaries ... both peoples have their independent and leading positions to hold...". In the concluding lines of the letter Whitman sends the Russians "an affectionate salutation from these shores, in America's name".

The letter conveys the poet's general international sympathies in a most expressive manner. Whitman writes: "As my dearest dream is for an internationality of poems and poets, binding the lands of the earth closer than all treaties or diplomacy — As the purpose beneath the rest in my book is

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[1] Whitman and Rolleston, *A Correspondence,* pp. 49-50.

[2] W. Whitman, *The Correspondence,* Vol. III, p. 259.

[3] Ibid., p. 260.

such hearty comradeship ... how happy I should be to get the hearing and emotional contact of the great Russian peoples."

Both Turgenev's interest in the American poet's work (including his translation of "Beat! Beat! Drums!") and Whitman's letter to the Russians remained unknown to Russian readers in the nineteenth century. Lev Tolstoy had good reason to write in 1890 that Whitman was almost unknown in Russia: not one collection of Russian translations from *Leaves of Grass* appeared in the nineteenth century.

Still, the fact remains that a start was made on Russian studies of *Leaves of Grass* in the early eighties, while Whitman was still alive.

Whitman's friend John Swinton wrote to the poet on August 12, 1882 that he had sent an article about American literature to the journal *Zagranichni vestnik* (Foreign Herald) and that much space in the article had been accorded to the author of *Leaves of Grass.* Swinton informed the poet that he had already received a copy of the journal containing his article in Russian translation, and added "I guess this is your first introduction to Rooshia." [1]

Swinton's article appeared in the June issue of *Zagranichni vestnik* for 1882 under the title "American Literature, a Lecture by John Swinton". In it the author calls Whitman a cosmic bard and refutes the opinion prevalent in the United States that the author of *Leaves of Grass* is a charlatan. Swinton describes Whitman as an original genius. He is a man of the people, having nothing in common with that class of society in which the love of nature and of truth is so often dimmed. The poet belongs to the workingmen, free and proud. He believes in people, in life and in democracy.

About the same time two articles by Russian authors on American poetry were printed in the Russian press. One was wholly devoted to Whitman, the other only in part. All three articles appeared in Russian periodicals about twenty-five years before the first Russian translations of Whitman by Kornei Chukovsky and Konstantin Balmont made their appearance.

One article was printed in *Otechestvenniye Zapiski* in July, 1882 over the signature of "P. Kryukov". Its real author was Pyotr Lavrov, a revolutionary populist, a well-known critic,

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[1] H. Traubel, *With Walt Whitman in Camden*, 1915, p. 393.

philosopher and publicist. The occasion for the appearance of the piece, which was entitled "Henry Wadsworth Longfellow", was the death of this poet.

Lavrov dwelt at length on Longfellow's wide popularity in his own country. "The newspapers have called him 'the greatest poet of America' and have counted his readers 'in millions'."[1] The author comments on the merits of Longfellow's poetry. In particular, he writes that Longfellow "must be appraised as a remarkable phenomenon in art, as a characteristic expression of the given phase of development in human thought ... as an illustration of the intellectual and aesthetic life of the epoch".[2] One will find in this poet, the reader is told, "a sincere and subtle feeling for the beauties of nature".[3]

At the same time Lavrov stresses the shortcomings of Longfellow's works, undoubtedly underestimating their poetical value. The article contains the following judgements: "... how much weaker and poetically inferior are the creations of this skilful, clever, educated American versifier in comparison with the works of the really great poets."[4] The source of the American poet's weaknesses lies in "the absence of any passionate and vital participation in the interests and problems of the current reality of Longfellow's life".[5] Longfellow's misfortune was that he refused "to act in the living present like his contemporaries..."[6]; the poet "was a stranger alike to everything too sensual and to all sharp mockery, biting sarcasm or wrathful outbursts.... His works could be pleasantly read by people of the most diverse views...."[7]

We shall not enter into a polemic with Lavrov, who seems to have been unaware of the value of Longfellow's *Poems on Slavery* and *The Song of Hiawatha*. What is important for us here is that he repeatedly contrasts *Leaves of Grass* to Longfellow's verse and always emphasizes Whitman's superiority over his more popular contemporary. Lavrov is convinced

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[1] *Otechestvenniye zapiski*, No. 7, 1882, "Sovremennoe obozreniye" (Modern Review), p. 57.

[2] Ibid., p. 58.

[3] Ibid., p. 68.

[4] Ibid., p. 64.

[5] Ibid., p. 65.

[6] Ibid., p. 66.

[7] Ibid., p. 65.

that Longfellow "is a complete opposite to his rival Walt Whitman".[1] The critic supports his point with a number of arguments.

The reader is told that Whitman far surpasses Longfellow "in the power and energy of his speech and in the breadth of his thought",[2] that he is a passionate poet, deeply disturbed by what he sees about him, including the disgrace of slavery: that he does not forget the sensual side of love, as a result of which he "scandalized Anglo-Saxon primness".[3]

Lavrov recognizes the particular significance of Whitman's poem "A Song for Occupations", which contains the crucial idea that working people, men and women, are more important than anything else in the world. However, Lavrov mistakenly asserts that even Whitman did not touch on the question of "the passion for gain"[4] wide-spread in the United States. We must assume that Lavrov was not acquainted with *Democratic Vistas* and the poems Whitman wrote in the seventies.

Lavrov was often mistaken in his analysis of Whitman's work, and his perception of *Leaves of Grass* was limited in a number of ways. But he was the first Russian critic who made a serious attempt to understand Whitman's poetry and to explore all its complexities. Some of Lavrov's ideas about *Leaves of Grass* retain validity to this day. Thus, he asserted that Whitman was "far more decisive" than Whittier (not to speak of Longfellow) in "taking up the most cardinal of problems with the working-man".[5]

Less than a year later another Russian journal carried an article entirely devoted to Whitman. Its author was P. Popov and it appeared in *Zagranichni vestnik* for March 1883. Kornei Chukovsky pointed out quite justly that the article is strewn with "barbarously translated" quotations. However that may be, it must not be forgotten that Popov discerned some basic features of *Leaves of Grass* earlier than many American critics (his article appeared while Whitman was still alive). Popov's forgotten article must be judged as one of the first serious

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[1] *Otechestvenniye zapiski*, No. 7, 1882, p. 68.
[2] Ibid., p. 79.
[3] Ibid., p. 68.
[4] Ibid., p. 73.
[5] Ibid., p. 74.

attempts to investigate Whitman's work not only in Russia, but in the whole world.

Like Lavrov, Popov tends to disparage Longfellow (and several other American poets, Whitman's contemporaries) declaring for instance, that in the work of Longfellow, Poe, Emerson, Whittier, and Lowell there is too little that is "original and purely American".[1] In contrast, Whitman "can be called the only original, purely American poet, the son and the bard of his native land".[2] The author of *Leaves of Grass* is an American patriot, but Whitman's patriotism is "alien to pomposity and boastfulness ... he does not close his eyes to the shortcomings of his fellow-citizens and the virtues of other nations...".[3]

Popov sees in Whitman a true humanist glorifying the finest ideals of humanity, a poet full of "inexhaustible love for Man".[4] The poet judges life with deep insight, and therefore "Whitman's poems are the cult of man; his ideal is the sovereign citizen, the democrat, the woman who is in many ways equal to man".[5] Furthermore, in his poetry Whitman "defends the solidarity of interests (of working people.— *M.M.*) and foretells the advent of the brotherhood of all nations".[6]

The author of this article was the first Russian critic to note an important aspect of Whitman's work—his noble utopian ideal, which found its expression in the words about "the great city" in "Song of the Broad-Axe". For a period of several decades following the appearance of this article, this feature of *Leaves of Grass* was to be largely overlooked in Russia (and elsewhere).

Significantly, Popov called Whitman a materialist, regarding him as a singer "of all the healthy manifestations of human life".[7]

In spite of the social illusions he entertains, Popov at times discerns with great keenness of vision the antagonism between Whitman's views and the credo of the American bourgeois.

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[1] *Zagranichni vestnik*, March 1883, p. 568.
[2] Ibid.
[3] Ibid., p. 570.
[4] Ibid., p. 572.
[5] Ibid., p. 571.
[6] Ibid., p. 579.
[7] Ibid.

The critic writes, for example: "His personal ideals are too high, his views too broad and his demands too severe to please the prosperous section of the contemporary public which has secured itself a comfortable life and worries neither about its neighbor nor the morrow." There follows an even more unambiguous statement, which tells us a great deal not only about Whitman's views, but also about those held by Popov himself: Whitman "decisively refuses to say even a single word in defense of the exploiting classes. It is therefore not surprising that Whitman is branded here as a communist, a socialist, an atheist, etc." [1]

Such a poet is naturally alien to passivity and fatalism, and demands, says Popov, "that every man should struggle constantly for his rights".[2]

Bringing Whitman to the attention of translators, Popov mentions, though only briefly, the poetical merits of *Leaves of Grass*, emphasizing the virtues of Whitman's "artistic" eye and ear.

This was the last substantial article by a Russian author to be published in the nineteenth century; but the short articles that appeared (several of them at the time of Whitman's death in 1892) almost all expressed sympathy for the poet.

In his article on Whitman Dioneo (Shklovsky) remarks that "Whitman's poems are rich in thoughts couched in bright and plastic images; his verse is unusually musical and energetic...".[3] The author also makes the interesting comment that "Whitman preaches the broadest, all-inclusive altruism".[4]

The poet Konstantin Balmont became interested in Whitman at the beginning of this century; he wrote articles about him and translated poems from *Leaves of Grass*. In his unpublished letters Balmont mentions a collection of translations of Whitman's verses which he is preparing for publication and the interest taken in it by Maxim Gorky. In a letter to Pyatnitsky written on November 6, 1903, Balmont says: "... I already have quite a number of translations of that American poet of genius who is completely unknown in Russia, Walt

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[1] *Zagranichni vestnik*, March 1883, p. 572.

[2] Ibid., p. 576.

[3] Dioneo, *Ocherki sovremennoi Anglii* (Sketches of Present-Day England), St. Petersburg, 1903, p. 416.

[4] Ibid., pp. 415-16.

Whitman. All of his poems are one great hymn to Life and are collected in one volume. I am sending you twenty-two poems to read."[1] From a letter of March 18, 1906, to the same Pyatnitsky we learn that Balmont "had given Alexei Maximovich (Gorky.— *M. M.*) two manuscripts last autumn",[2] and one of them was Whitman's *Leaves of Grass.*

In an article on Whitman published in the journal *Pereval* (The Pass) in 1907, Balmont spoke of *Leaves of Grass* as poetry "of struggle". Later he began to write about Whitman in a somewhat different vein. Compared to the articles by Lavrov and Popov, Balmont's articles on the American poet were, in my opinion, a step backwards, although they contained some interesting observations.

In the foreword to the Russian translation of *Leaves of Grass* published in 1911, Balmont compared Edgar Allan Poe and Whitman in this way: "If Edgar Poe is the movement of my soul from Southern smiles to the North, from flowers and kisses to crystals of ice, Walt Whitman is the opposite movement, from grief and doubts he arrives at a positive principle...."[3] Further on he says that Whitman is "the poet of the Present and the Future. He is a part, and a large part, of the future which is quickly moving towards us and already becoming the present. Idealized Democracy. Enlightened Power of the People. The victorious procession of Humanity in conquering the Planet."[4]

For more than sixty years Kornei Chukovsky played an outstanding role in the popularization of Whitman in our country. He published many collections of translations from *Leaves of Grass* as well as a number of articles about the American poet. Such an important poem as "Song of Myself" and other poems have been known to Russian readers almost from the beginning of this century in Kornei Chukovsky's brilliant translations.

Other gifted translators of Whitman's verse include M. A. Zenkevich, I. A. Kashkin and V. V. Levik.

In the introduction to his book of translations *My Whitman*

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[1] *Maxim Gorky's Archives.*

[2] Ibid.

[3] W. Whitman, *Leaves of Grass* (in Russian), translated by K. D. Balmont, Moscow, 1911, p. 6.

[4] Ibid., p. 7.

(1966), Chukovsky writes that Whitman's cosmic poetry gave him "new sight as it were" and enriched him "with a new — broad and joyful — vision of the world".[1]

It was thanks to Chukovsky that Whitman's poetry became known to such giants of Russian culture as the painter Ilya Repin and the poet Vladimir Mayakovsky.

In several collections of Whitman's verse which he issued, Chukovsky quotes Repin's thoughts on *Leaves of Grass*. Repin wrote, in particular: "I hope that with the appearance of Whitman a blow has at last been dealt to modern pagan individualism, to the cult of the unruly individual." [2] For Repin Whitman was a poet "of comradeship and love", the antithesis of the "self-enamored heroes".[3]

As Chukovsky informs us, Mayakovsky "creatively absorbed and assimilated the poetry of *Leaves of Grass*" [4] at the beginning of his literary life. He was greatly interested in Whitman's role as a poet who undermined old-fashioned literary traditions. Chukovsky goes on to emphasize that "Mayakovsky was never an imitator of Whitman.... But there is no doubt that in the years when he was building up his poetic style, one of the components of the complex alloy that became this style was the style of that other rebel, Walt Whitman." [5]

In the twenties Mayakovsky acquainted himself with the works of Carl Sandburg, who is often regarded as the principal heir to Whitman's traditions in twentieth-century American poetry. In the middle of that very decade I wrote an article comparing Vladimir Mayakovsky's description of Chicago in his poem "150,000,000" to Sandburg's "Chicago". I must say that, as a novice in the field of literary criticism, I failed to fully appreciate Mayakovsky's poem. I was rather disconcerted by the Russian poet's predilection for the grotesque.

In his book *My Discovery of America* Mayakovsky quoted the large excerpt from Sandburg's poem which I had used, polemizing with his (unnamed) critic. He insisted that he was fully entitled to use the grotesque in describing the city.

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[1] K. Chukovsky, *Moi Whitman* (My Whitman), M., Progress Publishers, 1960, p. 7.

[2] K. Chukovsky, *Walt Whitman*, Izdaniye Petrogradskogo Soveta, 1919, p. 115.

[3] Ibid.

[4] K. Chukovsky, *Moi Whitman*, p. 253.

[5] Ibid., p. 254.

I must admit now that Mayakovsky was not only fully in the right as far as the point under debate is concerned, but also that his reasoning demonstrated a remarkably profound penetration into an important feature of Walt Whitman's artistic manner. Mayakovsky, the author of a poem in which the sun drops in for a cup of tea and a chat, could not but feel a kinship with Whitman's lyrical hero "speeding with tail'd meteors, throwing fireballs like the rest".

So the theme of Whitman and Mayakovsky is still awaiting its investigator.

Lev Tolstoy's attitude to Whitman underwent a complicated development. His remarks on *Leaves of Grass* include some that are extremely negative. However, in his letter of 1890 to L. P. Nikiforov he mentions a little book by "a highly original and bold poet", Walt Whitman. "He is very well known in Europe, but almost no one has heard of him here." [1] It is also significant that Lev Tolstoy included Walt Whitman among American nineteenth-century writers who made up a brilliant pleiad the likes of which are rarely found in world literature.

I have already mentioned the opinions of Gorky and Lunacharsky. In contrast to the majority of critics, they both saw Whitman as a poet who went beyond individualism and sang hymns to human brotherhood.

Let me quote the concluding lines of Lunacharsky's article "Whitman and Democracy": "Communism will bring with it joy and light—immediately for some, gradually for others. Communism will put man in his rightful place. Man will awaken to an understanding of his destiny as the conscious and immortal final architect of the universe. Man in the collective is immortal. Only the individual is mortal.

"This is Whitman's basic idea. Anyone who does not understand it does not understand Whitman." [2]

"I Want the People ... to Have ... All of It"

Let us now examine how Walt Whitman has fared in his homeland.

It is a sad fact that Whitman does not enjoy the fame he deserves in America. This was demostrated by Charles Willard

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[1] L. Tolstoy, *O literature* (On Literature), Moscow, Goslitizdat, 1955, pp. 246-247 (in Russian).

[2] A. Lunacharsky, op. cit., Vol. 5, p. 388.

in his book *Whitman's American Fame* published after the Second World War. Not long ago, in the late fifties, another American scholar, Clarence Gohdes, noted "the comparative neglect of Walt Whitman by the more fashionable American critics of late..." and added: "... it cannot be said that he is now regarded in the United States as a national poet in the way, for example, that Pushkin has been so regarded in Russia or Mickiewicz in Poland." [1]

An article on Walt Whitman by the *Washington Post* staff writer Colman McCarthy which appeared in May 1969 (on the occasion of the 150th anniversary of the poet's birth) admits: "It is safe to say, as well as sad, that Whitman is not much read in America anymore. In a large newspaper ad pushing poetry books last week, Brentanos listed works by Sandburg, Millay, Eliot, Frost, Dickinson, Pound and others, but no Whitman."

And nonetheless....

At the very beginning of this century, when one of the first socialist literary journals appeared in New York, Walt Whitman's words were printed on its first page.

At about the same time (concurrent with the rise of the democratic movement against imperialism) the prominent literary historian William Trent was correctly appraising some aspects of Whitman's poetry.

During the twenties many important representatives of the democratic tradition in American culture wrote with genuine love of the author of *Leaves of Grass.* Besides the poet Carl Sandburg, there was another outstanding man amongst them, Vernon Parrington, a literary historian of democratic convictions.

He made the following remarks: "That America was not yet a democracy — was very far indeed from a democracy — that it was a somewhat shoddy *bourgeois* capitalistic society shot through with cant and hypocrisy and every meanness, he (Whitman.— *M. M.*) saw with calm, searching eyes. No contemporary critic ... saw more clearly the unlovely reality or dealt with it more scathingly...." [2]

Whitman dreamed passionately of being followed by "a new

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[1] *Walt Whitman Review,* 1959, March, p. 3.

[2] V. L. Parrington, *Main Currents in American Thought,* Vol. 3, p. 82.

brood" of poets, "native, athletic, continental, greater than before known" ("Poets to Come", 1860):

Arouse! for you must justify me.

I myself but write one or two indicative words for the future,
I but advance a moment only to wheel and hurry back in the darkness.

I am a man who, sauntering along without fully stopping, turns a casual look upon you and then averts his face,
Leaving it to you to prove and define it,
Expecting the main things from you.

The great twentieth-century American poet Carl Sandburg unquestionably grew up on the Whitman tradition. He loved the realism of *Leaves of Grass* and the democratic sentiments of its author. In the poem "I am the People, the Mob", Sandburg expresses ideas close to Whitman's:

I am the people — the mob — the crowd — the mass.
Do you know that all the great work of the world is done through me?[1]

Sandburg concludes his poem in a way in which Whitman might well have done:

Sometimes I growl, shake myself and spatter a few red drops for history to remember.— Then — I forget.
When I, the People, learn to remember, when I, the People, use the lessons of yesterday and no longer forget who robbed me last year, who played me for a fool — then there will be no speaker in all the world say the name: "The People", with any fleck of a sneer in his voice or any far-off smile of derision.
The mob — the crowd — the mass — will arrive then.[2]

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[1] C. Sandburg, *Complete Poems*, N. Y., Harcourt, Brace, 1950, p. 71.
[2] Ibid.

Sandburg developed the traditions of *Leaves of Grass* at a new stage in the social struggle and in the history of poetry. In one of his poems he praises the "three dusky syllables" which had reached America "out of great Russia". In that land "workmen took guns and went out to die for: Bread, Peace, Land".[1]

Although that other remarkable twentieth-century American poet Robert Frost was very dissimilar to Whitman, his poetry contains some motifs which can be traced back to *Leaves of Grass*.

When John Reed, set aflame by the fire of the October Revolution in Russia, wanted to depict his native land in the poem "America 1918", he spoke in Whitman's language.

"I know thee, America!" exclaims Reed, and then, striving in Whitman's manner to embrace as many aspects of working life as possible, he talks of fishermen and hunters, cow-punchers, prospectors and forest-rangers.

It seems as though Whitman himself is continuing the conversation begun in "Song of Myself". We see before us

Fishermen putting out from Astoria in the foggy dawn
their double-bowed boats,
Lean cow-punchers jogging south from Burns, with faces
burned leathery and silent,
Stringy old prospectors trudging behind reluctant
pack-horses, across the Nevada alkali,
Hunters coming out of the brush at night-fall on the brink
of the Lewis and Clark canyon,
Grunting as they slide off their fifty-pound packs and
look around for a place to make camp,
Forest rangers standing on a bald peak and sweeping the
wilderness for smoke....[2]

Reed also sees "pale half-fed cash-girls in department stores" and "gaunt children making paper-flowers in dim garrets". He finds in America

Ward-leaders with uptilted cigars, planning mysterious
underground battles for power,
Raucous soap-boxers in Union Square, preaching the
everlasting crusade....[3]

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[1] C. Sandburg, *Complete Poems*, p. 191.
[2] John Reed, *An Anthology*, M., Progress Publishers, p. 239.
[3] Ibid., p. 246.

In the thirties — the "red thirties", as the decade is sometimes called — the years of hunger and spiritual torment, of wrath and hope, many American poets turned once again to Whitman.

When the clashes between the classes were at their fiercest, Stephen Vincent Benét wrote his highly acclaimed "Ode to Walt Whitman".

The poet stands besides Whitman's grave. He hears his voice. "Is it well with you, comrades?" asks Whitman, "Is it well with these States?" [1]

In reply Benét speaks of the remarkable bridges the Americans have built, which are "arched like the necks of beautiful horses" and of the wars in which his fellow-countrymen have been victorious.

But Whitman repeats his worried questions.

And this time the reply of the author of the "Ode" is full of grief and irony. Yes, there are many "fine new toys" in the United States, but "there is a rust on the land" — "they burn the grain in the furnace while the men go hungry".[2]

What has happened to his "tan-faced children", Whitman wants to know. The poet's children are having a bad time of it. Skilled workers are unemployed; their shoes have holes in them. Hungry young men roam the country from one end to the other.

The poem ends with an agonizing question: "Was the blood spilt for nothing, then?" [3], the blood of those revolutionary fighters who battled for American independence?

Even the poet Archibald MacLeish, who at the beginning of the thirties felt little sympathy for the working masses (at the time he mocked the advocates of brotherhood) changed a great deal by the end of the decade. He began to speak in his poems of the grandeur of the ideas of brotherhood and the need to struggle against the vices of society; and he spoke in a manner that recalled Walt Whitman's.

I would go so far as to say that MacLeish's best works were written at the time when he accepted Whitman's heritage as his poetic banner.

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[1] *The Democratic Spirit*, p. 799.
[2] Ibid., p. 800.
[3] Ibid., p. 802.

In recent times some American interpreters of Whitman have attempted to counteract his "regrettable" influence on contemporary American poetry by declaring Whitman's work to be an incarnation of ... conservatism. However, it is impossible to hide the revolutionary essence of so much of Whitman's poetry.

It is significant that Langston Hughes, for one, had no reservations about calling the author of *Leaves of Grass* America's greatest poet. In a foreword to a selection of Whitman's works Hughes dwelt on the poet's hatred of slavery, emphasized that he loathed war and then said: "Perhaps because of his simplicity, timid poetry lovers over the years have been frightened away from his *Leaves of Grass*, poems as firmly rooted and as brightly growing as the grass itself." [1]

Some of Hughes' poems, for all their originality, show a definite link with the traditions established by Whitman.

The American literary historian Daniel Aaron sees a direct connection between the degree of sympathy felt for Whitman by American writers and the condition of "the revolutionary spirit" in the United States. Remarking on the rapid growth of interest in the author of *Leaves of Grass* during the thirties Aaron speaks of a new decline since 1946.

Aaron is not completely right, however. The growth of sympathy for the genuine Whitman is attested, for instance, by the articles published by B. Slote in the book *Start with the Sun* (University of Nebraska Press, 1960).

To be sure, in the first ten or fifteen years after the Second World War the Whitman tradition was not much respected in American literature. And it is probably not coincidental that American poetry suffered a noticeable decline during this period.

Recently, however, a change for the better has occurred. New and important names have risen on the American poetic horizon over the last years. I have no intention of investigating modern poetry in the United States with a view of discovering Whitman's influence, but I would like to bring attention to this influence by considering two modern poets.

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[1] *I Hear the People Singing*, Intr. by L. Hughes, N. Y., International Publishers, 1946, p. 9.

For all the dissimilarity between *Leaves of Grass* and the work of William Carlos Williams, the later works of this poet (he died in 1963) exhibit his respect for the great Whitman tradition.

There are quite a few debatable points in Williams' essay on the author of *Leaves of Grass* included in the critical anthology dedicated to the hundredth anniversary of this book. Still, Williams propounds some interesting ideas which convey his respect for America's greatest poet. It is a curious fact that Williams considers the very title of Whitman's book of poems as expressing "a rebel viewpoint, an American view point".[1]

Williams wrote that though "Whitman's verses seemed disorderly", in actual fact they "ran according to an unfamiliar and difficult measure".[2] It is hardly surprising, therefore, that prominent American poets of our time have discerned in Williams' epic poem "Paterson", a continuation of the Whitman tradition, despite its striking divergences from that tradition.

Carl Sandburg, recently deceased, said that shadows of "Jefferson, Lincoln and Whitman..."[3] were close to the author of "Paterson". And Robert Lowell, probably America's greatest contemporary poet, showed very keen perception in remarking that "Paterson" portrays "Whitman's America, grown pathetic and tragic, brutalized by inequality...".[4]

It would be out of place here to attempt a detailed analysis of the work of so contradictory a poet as Allen Ginsberg, the best known representative of the "beat" school. I do not think anyone would deny that realistic tendencies in his work rub shoulders with modernist and nihilistic ones. It is also worth noting that chance brought Ginsberg and Williams together in Paterson, New Jersey, where both resided for a long stretch of time.

In his poem "Paterson" Williams incorporated some of the letters he had received from the younger poet. Williams also wrote an introduction to Ginsberg's *Howl and Other Poems,*

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[1] *Leaves of Grass. One Hundred Years After,* Stanford, Cal., Stanford University Press, 1955, p. 22.

[2] Ibid., p. 27.

[3] William Carlos Williams, *Paterson,* N. J. New Directions, 1963, p. 2.

[4] Ibid.

which was to earn renown. In this introduction Williams wrote that Ginsberg had been "mentally much disturbed by the life which he had encountered about him...". Further on Williams admitted that he never imagined Ginsberg would live and become mature enough to write a book of poems. "... That he has gone on developing and perfecting his art is no less amazing to me,"[1] he confessed.

I think I would be justified in asserting that in Ginsberg's better works we feel Whitman's influence combined with that of modernism. For instance in the poem "Lysergic Acid" we find the following "Whitmanesque" lines:

I Allen Ginsberg a separate consciousness
I who want to be God
I who want to hear the infinite minutest vibration
of eternal harmony.[2]

In *Howl* Ginsberg also follows in Whitman's footsteps in certain satirical passages. Here is one example:

Moloch whose mind is pure machinery! Moloch whose
blood is running money![3]

The Whitman principle is most obvious (and, I should say, most effective) in those poems where Ginsberg makes a direct reference to the author of *Leaves of Grass.*

Here is a passage from the poem "A Supermarket in California":

What thoughts I have of you tonight, Walt Whitman,
for I walked down the sidestreets
under the trees with a headache self-conscious
looking at the full moon.[4]

The poet continues:

Where are we going, Walt Whitman? The doors close
in an hour. Which way does your beard
point tonight?[5]

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[1] Allen Ginsberg, *Howl and Other Poems*, San Francisco, City Lights, 1970, p. 7.

[2] Allen Ginsberg, *Kadish and Other poems*, San Francisco, City Lights, 1961, p. 86.

[3] Allen Ginsberg, *Howl...*, p. 17.

[4] Ibid., p. 23.

[5] Ibid.

We know that Walt Whitman saw no antagonism between technological progress and nature. In "Sunflower Sutra", yet another of Ginsberg's poems reflecting modern American reality, he polemicizes, as it were, with Whitman, asserting the existence of an irreconcilable antagonism between these two spheres of life. As though in refutation of the glorification of the locomotive in *Leaves of Grass*, Ginsberg exclaims with hysterical insistency:

> *You were never no locomotive, Sunflower,*
> *you were a sunflower!*[1]

We are told that Ginsberg and his bosom friend and like-thinker are "sad-eyed" because they are surrounded "by the gnarled steel roots of trees of machinery".[2]

Of course, Whitman lives today not only in the work of a new generation of poets. The great poet's verses continue to find new readers and admirers among the working people of America, although at first sight the facts may seem to contradict this statement.

In the late fifties Karl Shapiro stated that in the United States Whitman was popular neither in literary circles nor among the general reading public. Several years later Walter Lowenfels said that Whitman was read more widely in the socialist countries. In a speech made at the end of the fifties, Sculley Bradley, one of the most important experts on the poet's work in the United States, also emphasized Whitman's "remarkable growth in stature around the world",[3] including Russia.

It is true that in the Soviet Union and the other socialist countries Whitman's poetry has become the property of an immense audience. It is also true that in his own homeland he has not yet fully conquered the public. And yet I believe the "good gray poet" now converses with a greater number of his fellow-countrymen than is usually imagined.

Here is one modest piece of evidence. In the early fifties the well-known novelist James Jones portrayed in his novel *From*

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[1] Ibid., p. 30.
[2] Ibid., p. 28.
[3] *Walt Whitman Review*, 1959, Dec., p. 74.

Here to Eternity a worker who, despite all his waverings, cherishes the ideas of the solidarity of the working people. Jones says of him: "The first book he had bought for himself, with the first money from the first job, was Walt Whitman's *Leaves of Grass....*"[1]

The Chairman of the Communist Party of the United States, Elizabeth Gurley Flynn, told me not long before she died how she first came to know Whitman seriously. It was after the Second World War, while she was in prison. She took *Leaves of Grass* with her, and the book was borrowed by many of the women imprisoned with her. The book stayed in the prison.

It is a curious fact that the same was true of Gus Hall, the present General Secretary of the Communist Party of the United States. In an interview published in 1966 he states: "I discovered Whitman while I was in Leavenworth."[2]

In a foreword to a book by Mother Bloor, Elizabeth Gurley Flynn wrote that this outstanding representative of the revolutionary movement in the United States had absorbed Whitman's concept of Americanism — "the dear love of comrades".[3]

Ella Reeve Bloor herself wrote in her book *We Are Many* that Whitman had passed on "some of his own closeness to nature, his great love for human beings ... to all of us who knew and loved him".[4]

The poet was forty years old when "full of life now, compact, visible" he addressed these words to "one a century hence or any number of centuries hence...". ("Full of Life Now", 1860):

When you read these I that was visible am become invisible,
Now it is you, compact, visible, realizing my poems, seeking me,

[1] J. Jones, *From Here to Eternity*, N. Y., New American Library, 1953, pp. 612-13.
[2] *American Dialog*, Summer 1966, p. 17.
[3] E. Bloor, *We Are Many*, p. 11.
[4] Ibid., p. 24.

Fancying how happy you were if I could be with you and
become your comrade;
Be it as if I were with you. (Be not too certain but
I am now with you.)

Whitman returned many times to the idea that his poems about comradeship uniting working people would live on in the minds of those who followed him.

The poem "Crossing Brooklyn Ferry" (1856) also expresses a vital feeling of the unity of the present and the future, and the poet's community with the generations to come. With joyful excitement the poet observes the crowds of people "in the usual costumes" crossing the river on the Brooklyn ferry. The colors of the sunset burn brightly, the river-waters are flowing, boats come and go, the sailors work away. All of this pleases Whitman.

But the poet does not exist only in the present. He sees new people coming after his contemporaries. Other men and women will cross this river, other people will gaze at its banks, the boats, will enjoy the sunset. The author of the poem is not depressed at the thought that his time will pass away. He is not even sad. He has in mind future generations as well as his contemporaries when he says:

Others will see the islands large and small...
A hundred years hence, or ever so many hundred
years hence, others will see them....

Whitman saw what these people would see. He felt what they would feel many years later when looking at this river and this sky. He celebrates the eternal movement of life, the waves of the river, the boats and the seabirds. The river flows as time flows. Then let these waters flow time without end, let the "gorgeous clouds of the sunset" drench with their splendor "me, or the men and women generations after me!"

Walt Whitman lives on today and will continue to live on in the future, for he gave expression to many of our most intimate thoughts, feelings and hopes.

How is it possible to remain indifferent to a generous heart? How is it possible not to answer a smile with a smile, joy with joy, trust with trust, and brotherly feelings with the warmth of comradeship?

Whitman is dear to millions because he was in love with life. His poetry attracts people because of its free, unfettered form, its streams of images, its endless variety of rhythms and its verse, now broad, free and unhurried, like the fields and prairies of America, now tense, as though gathered into a fist in order to answer blow for blow. All his life Whitman was anxious that the masses be given the opportunity to live a truly full life. "I want," he declared, "the people: most of the people: the crowd, the mass, the whole body of the people: men, women, children: I want them to have what belongs to them: not a part of it, not most of it, but all of it...." [1]

"Give to Sing the Songs of the Great Idea"

What Russian does not know Pushkin's prophetic words:

And long the people yet will honour me
Because my lyre was tuned to loving-kindness
And, in a cruel Age, I sang of Liberty
And mercy begged of Justice in her blindness.[2]

Pushkin's "Monument" was written in 1836. Twenty years later the American Walt Whitman published his poem "By Blue Ontario's Shore", which contains these lines:

Give me to sing the songs of the great Idea, take all
the rest,
I have loved the earth, sun, animals, I have despised
riches,
I have given alms to every one that ask'd, stood up
for the stupid and crazy, devoted
my income and labor to others,
Hated tyrants, argued not concerning God, had
patience and indulgence toward the people,
taken off my hat to nothing known or unknown,
Gone freely with powerful uneducated persons and with
the young, and with the mothers of families,
Read these leaves to myself in the open air, tried
them by trees, stars, rivers,

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[1] H. Canby, *Walt Whitman*, p. 245.
[2] Translated by Avril Pyman.

Dismiss'd whatever insulted my own soul or defiled
my body,
Claim'd nothing to myself which I have not carefully
claim'd for others on the same terms....

This is Whitman's poetic credo; this is the essence of all that is most precious to the poet. He remained forever faithful to the great Idea of liberty, forever true to his inspired dream of a world united in comradeship and love. The edifice of his poetry is built on the foundation of that Idea and dream, and it continues to stand as a monument to the magnificent spirit of Walt Whitman.

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